

RETHINKING RESEARCH IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK¹

REPENSANDO A INVESTIGAÇÃO EM LINGUÍSTICA APLICADA: UMA ENTREVISTA COM O ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK

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ABSTRACT

During the 1st International Congress of Critical Applied Linguistics (ICCAL) - held in Brasília-DF, Brazil, from October 19 to 21, 2015, by the “Group for Critical and Advanced Language Studies” [Grupo de Estudos Críticos e Avançados em Linguagens] - Alastair Pennycook (University of Technology, Sydney/Australia and the MultiLing Center at the University of Oslo, Norway) gave the event’s opening lecture entitled *Critical Applied Linguistics Challenges*. Widely known for his pioneering work with critical approaches in language education and applied linguistics, he generously accepted our request of being interviewed on this topic at this opportunity in 2024². This interview is divided into two parts. Firstly, we aim to delve into the philosophical underpinnings and motivations that have guided his illustrious career, offering our readers an in-depth look at the forces shaping his research and theoretical stances. Secondly, we seek to inspire the next generation of researchers by sharing his insights on navigating the complexities of interdisciplinary research, the evolution of his theoretical perspectives, and his vision for the future of applied linguistics.

Keywords: Applied Linguistics; challenges; interdisciplinary research.

RESUMO

Durante o 1º Congresso Internacional de Linguística Aplicada Crítica (ICCAL) – realizado em Brasília-DF, Brasil, de 19 a 21 de outubro de 2015, pelo Grupo de Estudos Críticos e Avançados em Linguagens (GECAL) – Alastair Pennycook (Universidade de Tecnologia, Sidney/Austrália e do Centro MultiLing da Universidade de Oslo, Noruega) fez a conferência de abertura do evento intitulada *Desafios da Linguística Aplicada Crítica*. Amplamente conhecido por seu trabalho pioneiro com abordagens críticas na educação de línguas e na linguística aplicada, ele generosamente aceitou o nosso pedido para falar sobre esse tema nessa oportunidade em 2024³. Esta entrevista está dividida em duas partes. Primeiro pretendemos aprofundar os fundamentos filosóficos e as motivações que guiaram a sua ilustre carreira, oferecendo aos nossos leitores um olhar aprofundado sobre as forças que moldam a sua investigação e as suas posições teóricas. A seguir, procuramos inspirar a próxima geração de pesquisadores/as, compartilhando as suas ideias sobre como navegar nas complexidades da investigação interdisciplinar, a evolução das suas perspectivas teóricas e a sua visão para o futuro da linguística aplicada.

Palavras-chaves: Linguística Aplicada; desafios; investigação interdisciplinar.

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- 1 We are immensely grateful for his willingness to participate in this conversation, and we look forward to witnessing the continued impact of his work on the field. Thank him for your profound contributions and for inspiring the next generation of researchers and educators.
- 2 For this written interview, Prof. Kleber Silva and Prof. Leketi Makalela invited our distinguished guest - Prof. Alastair Pennycook, who kindly accepted the invitation. Prof. Silva and Prof. Makalela read and discussed in virtual meetings the seminal academic production of Prof. Alastair Pennycook published in the last 20 (twenty) years and drafted the sections and questions that formed the basis of this interview. They then sent the questions to Prof. Alastair Pennycook, who kindly answered all the questions in writing. And together we collaboratively constructed this interview, which we are pleased to make available to the academic-scientific community in Brazil and abroad in this renowned journal - *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada/UNICAMP*.
- 3 Para esta entrevista escrita, o Prof. Kleber Silva e o Prof. Leketi Makalela convidaram o nosso ilustre convidado - Prof. Alastair Pennycook, que gentilmente aceitou o convite. O Prof. Silva e o Prof. Makalela leram e discutiram em reuniões virtuais a produção acadêmica seminal do Prof. Alastair Pennycook publicada nos últimos 22 (vinte e dois) anos e redigiram as seções e as perguntas que serviram de base a esta entrevista. Alastair Pennycook gentilmente respondeu a todas as perguntas por escrito. E juntos construímos colaborativamente esta entrevista, que temos o prazer de disponibilizar para a comunidade acadêmico-científica do Brasil e do exterior nesta renomada revista - *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada/UNICAMP*.

INTRODUCTION

Alastair Pennycook's work has been influential in four key domains. His earliest and possibly still best-known work has sought to problematize the global spread of English by showing how it is intertwined with social, cultural, political and economic concerns. The global spread of English is not simply a chance event but is deeply bound up with colonial and neoliberal forces. The concept of the *worldliness of English* (1994) points not just to the international use of the language but also to its embeddedness in local contexts. It is a language of both opportunity and exclusion, of possibility and limitations, of creativity and destruction. Subsequent work showed the deep connections between forms of colonial knowledge and English discourses (1998).

The second theme develops the critical orientation of the first into a wider conceptualization of critical applied linguistics (2001; 2021), understood as a critical approach to language education, policy, pedagogy, rights and planning by placing power and politics at the core of the analysis. Critical applied linguistics is a critical approach to the theory and practice of applied linguistics, incorporating moral and political projects with transformative agendas that take up the everyday concerns of classrooms, everyday language use, and more broadly concerns around gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, politics, and ideology. The third theme concerns critical studies in the philosophy of language, with a particular interest in posthumanism, social practice, locality and decoloniality. In a series of books, starting with the co-edited (with Sinfree Makoni), *Disinventing and reconstituting languages* (2007), this work has sought to ask what language and languages are and why it is important to challenge standard linguistic or applied linguistic answers to this question. From looking at *language as a local practice* (2010) and *language and mobility* (2012), to exploring language from *posthumanist* (2018), *Global South* (Pennycook and Makoni, 2020) or *assemblage* (2024) perspectives, the focus in this work has been to understand the embeddedness of local language practices in social life. Language is something we do rather than a system or structure we draw on.

The fourth perspective seeks to question and understand language, popular culture and urban multilingualism, particularly through the focus on *metrolingualism* (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015). This sociolinguistic orientation explores translingual practices in different geopolitical, sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts (particularly in Sydney and Tokyo), seeking to understand ethnographically what kind of local linguistic interactions occur in different parts of the city (such as caf  s, shops, kitchens, construction sites and markets). This local focus is expanded through an interest in popular culture and multilingualism, explored in relation to English (Pennycook, 2007), other languages (Alim, Ibrahim and Pennycook, 2009) and in online and offline interactions in Mongolia and Bangladesh. (Dovchin, Sultana and Pennycook, 2017). Already in the early work, several key themes that cut across his thinking can be seen: an insistence on understanding the politics of language, that is to say the ways in which language use is always bound up with questions of social power; the need to explore what language and languages are rather than accepting the ways they are described in orthodox linguistics; and the importance of understanding things locally, of seeing how things operate in their particular environments.

The purpose of this interview is twofold. Firstly, we aim to delve into the philosophical underpinnings and motivations that have guided his career, offering our readers an in-depth look at the forces shaping his research and theoretical stances. Secondly, we seek to inspire the next generation of researchers by sharing his insights on navigating the complexities of interdisciplinary fields, the evolution of his theoretical perspectives, and his vision for the future of applied linguistics.

This conversation is a cornerstone of this issue, aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of critical applied linguistics and encouraging emerging scholars to engage with and build upon foundational theories in innovative ways. We believe that his reflections will not only enrich our readers' understanding but also stimulate dialogue and exploration within the academic community.

QUESTIONS

1. Career and Motivations

1.1 What inspired you to enter the field of applied linguistics, and how have your motivations evolved over your career?⁴

Like many at the more practical end of the field I started out in language (English) teaching. After a number of years teaching in Germany, Japan and China, I ended up in Canada doing a PhD, which is where I started to rethink some of what was going on in ELT and what our academic disciplines had to say about it. I had become troubled by what I was part of: a mobile class of ELT professionals that could move easily around the world. I had encountered many instances of bigotry and racism in the profession – disparaging students and local teachers and their use of English or ways of learning (which only got worse when I later moved to Hong Kong and saw the deep connections between these attitudes and colonialism; Pennycook, 1998) – and a painful lack of concern with how we should understand the global spread of English and its connections to capitalism, colonialism and exploitation. Whereas previously I had kept a critical view of the injustices of the world and an interest in language and language education separate (the removal of language from its social world in linguistics made this possible), it started to become clear that it was both theoretically possible (by linking language to power) and politically necessary (by making critical concerns central) to bring these views of the world together. The trouble was that linguistics, in either its orthodox or more practical guises, had very little to say about this, so I set out to develop my own version of critical applied linguistics to address what I thought needed to be central rather than peripheral to our work.

1.2 Can you share any pivotal moments or key influences that significantly shaped your research direction or theoretical stance?

A key period when my thinking started to shift was when I worked at Xiangtan (湘潭) University in China from 1985 to 1988. I had lived and travelled quite widely by the time I moved to China: I had studied at university in France, taught English in Germany, worked in Japan from 1981-1983 (where I learned a lot about linguistic and cultural difference), and completed a Masters degree in Montreal in Canada (where my Québécois friends gave me a good grounding in the politics of language). My years in China, however, opened my eyes to a range of new concerns. The ‘Open Door Policy’ had started to have its effects as China moved from its more isolationist years towards the position it now plays in the world. Deng Xiao Ping had urged Chinese to ‘learn from the West’, but for some of us taking up this opportunity to work in China, we wanted this not just to be a reciprocal learning experience – we would learn from China as China could learn from us – but also a chance to develop a critique of the West (capitalism, individualism, extractivism) through our understanding of China.

Hunan province, where I lived, was red and hot, not only its sizzling summers and chilli-laden food, but also its political history. This was peasant country. Down the road was ShaoShan (韶山), a small village with a vast railway station, a remnant of the years during the cultural revolution when Red Guards would pour into the Hunan countryside to visit Mao ZeDong’s (1893-1976) birthplace. By the 1980s it was another sleepy Hunan village, a bicycle-ride away, where we would go now and then, pilgrim-like, clutching an old copy of the Little Red Book. Across these rice fields between his birthplace ShaoShan and the provincial capital Changsha, much of early Maoist thought and action was grown: “Our educational policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually and physically and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture” (Mao ZeDong, 1957/ 1972, p.165). For many, particularly in the West, the thoughts of Mao ZeDong are no longer seen (if they ever were) as relevant, though it is worth dwelling on the significance of his insistence on “the dependence of theory on practice, that is, theory is based on practice and in turn serves practice” (Li Wei, 2018, p.11).

This was red country, where the land reforms after the 1949 revolution were still remembered by old peasants, sitting smoking ragged cigarettes under the eaves of their houses on land reclaimed from the former

4 The questions in this interview were prepared by Kleber Silva and Leketi Makalela.

landowners. In the university dining hall, old cadres with long memories and tenuous links to the university came to eat in their flat caps and low-collared jackets, eyeing foreign nouveaux-Maoists with suspicion. So much that China has been over the last century has emerged from the thick, red earth of Hunan. All of this seeped into my mind and body in the late 1980s and changed the way I thought about the relation between academic work, life and politics (and chilli). Those years between 1985 and 1988 were a time of great learning for me, learning the beauty of Chinese calligraphy, learning a tonal language for the first time, learning about Chinese history and politics, learning about the lives of the peasants who lived on the other side of the wall, learning how drivers and cooks (*shifu* – 師父) were treated as respected workers rather than as employees. During those years in China I unlearned much of what I had assumed before, becoming more able to see the world through others' eyes, to accept uncertainty, to avoid reducing others to their collective identities.

At the same time, colleagues gave me books to read by George Steiner (1975) that opened up a whole new world of language and translation, Roland Barthes (1977), whose work on images and signs opened up new way of thinking about semiotics, and above all Michel Foucault (1970), whose work has inspired much of my thinking ever since. Reading Foucault encouraged me to think otherwise – *penser autrement*, as Foucault (1984) called it – not just to think differently, or to question or critique, but to think in different ways. As Foucault argued towards the end of his life, it becomes indispensable at a certain point to try to think otherwise if we want to continue to think and reflect usefully. If philosophy is to do anything other than continue to rethink the already-thought, we have to ask how and how far we can start to think otherwise. These works and the discussions we had around them pushed me not only towards new bodies of thought but also towards the imperative to think in other ways. And when I reluctantly left Xiangtan University in 1988 – travelling slowly by train via Beijing, Moscow, Warsaw, Paris, London, and eventually to Toronto in Canada – to study for a PhD, there were many ideas buzzing in my head about how we might start to think otherwise about ELT.

2. Research Philosophy and Methodology

2.1 How would you describe the philosophical foundations of your research? How have these influenced your approach to language education and applied linguistics?

As suggested, Foucault has long been a great influence. Such thinkers can be important for a number of reasons. Foucault can give you a good lesson in thinking differently, as he turns ideas on their head and asks you to consider very different ways of thinking. Because he works through historical examples – the history of madness, prisons or sexuality – his philosophy is grounded in consideration of social practices. This makes it more readable than philosophy that only seems interested in itself. Perhaps most important, however, is his interest in the *history of the present* – how is it that we come to understand the world in particular ways? It is probably this that has always fascinated me – when I read or hear something being explained, I ask why it is being explained in these terms, along these lines, with these assumptions. How might we account for this way of thinking and are there other ways of thinking about this? Other thinkers who draw on Foucault, particularly Judith Butler (1990), have also been inspirational for thinking about gender, sexuality, performativity and more.

In addition, of course, I have been greatly influenced by a very wide range of thinkers who raise questions that Foucault does not, from the decolonial imperative that stretches from Fanon (1961) to Mbembe (2017) and Mignolo and Walsh (2019) to the feminist and antiracist work of bell hooks (1989; 1994), or the challenges to Northern ways of thinking from Indigenous perspectives in Nakata (2007) and Smith (2012). I read extensively (and not just in English) and have developed a broad philosophical position (though it's always evolving) that can be tentatively summarised as emphasizing embeddedness (what is happening on a local level?), power (how can we understand the local politics of language?) ideas (what kinds of knowledge are going to help us understand a problem?), integrity (what ethical questions are being asked on whose behalf?) and collaboration (with whom are we working and towards what ends?).

2.2 Your research often integrates interdisciplinary perspectives. How do you navigate these choices, and what advice would you give to researchers looking to adopt a similarly interdisciplinary approach?

I would prefer to turn the question around and ask how on earth anyone thinks they can investigate interesting problems by using only disciplinary knowledge. Disciplines themselves are highly problematic, restricting our understanding and regulating the kinds of questions we can ask. I'm not convinced either that talking of interdisciplinary work gets us much further since it still potentially keeps disciplines in place (it just suggests we should use more than one). The hierarchical organization of knowledge in disciplines through processes of classification and framing plays a significant role in the regulation of access to knowledge (Bernstein, 2000). As May (2014, p.15) suggests, this helps us to see how and why disciplines "are so often defined (and confined) by a narrowly derived set of research assumptions, approaches, and related models of teaching and learning." Gordon (2006) critiques *disciplinary decadence* (reductive disciplinary thinking in which practitioners treat their disciplines as either an exclusive standpoint on reality or reality itself) and the ossification of disciplines through *epistemic apartheid* (the segregation of knowledge into intellectual fortresses). It would be better, he suggests, to "suspend disciplinarity" by halting tendencies towards centrification when confronted by difficult questions (Gordon, 2006, p. 34).

I've never thought it very convincing to consider applied linguistics as a discipline. As McCarthy (2001, p.21) has observed, the "lack of unitary theory and of clear disciplinary boundaries" in applied linguistics might be seen as a form of strength, with "its very openness to outside influences being its strongest and most enduring quality." As Moita Lopes (2006) has long argued, we would be better off thinking in *indisciplinary* terms (Pennycook, 2024b). Critical applied linguistics has to be more dynamic than just adding political analysis to a fixed applied linguistic concern. Applied linguistics is better seen as an *epistemic assemblage*, where language-oriented projects, epistemic frameworks and matters of concern converge (Pennycook, 2018b), or as I reframed this more recently in terms of *language matters of concern*, *practical theories of language*, and *critical and ethical responses* (2024a). It is more useful to think of applied linguistics less as a body of knowledge we use, but as a constantly emerging set of concerns about language for which we develop practical theories of language (translanguaging is arguably one such theory) whose effects we judge not from narrow concerns of efficacy but rather in broader political and ethical frames.

3. Contributions and Impact

3.1 Of your many contributions to the field, which do you see as the most impactful or significant, and why?

Perhaps my best-known work has sought to problematize the global spread of English by showing how it is intertwined with social, cultural, political and economic concerns. The global spread of English is not simply a chance event but is deeply bound up with colonial and neoliberal forces. The *worldliness of English* points not just to the international use of the language but also to its embeddedness in local contexts. It is a language of both opportunity and exclusion, of possibility and limitations, of creativity and destruction. Subsequent work has shown the deep connections between forms of colonial knowledge and English discourses (1998) as well as English and forms of popular culture (2007). The approach to knowledge and politics developed in these studies of the global spread of English developed a wider conceptualization of *critical applied linguistics* (2001; 2021), understood as a critical approach to language education, policy, pedagogy, rights and planning by placing power and politics at the core of the analysis. Critical applied linguistics is a critical approach to the theory and practice of applied linguistics, incorporating moral and political projects with transformative agendas that take up the everyday concerns of classrooms, everyday language use, and more broadly concerns around gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, politics, and ideology.

Other work concerns critical studies in the philosophy of language, with a particular interest in social practice, locality, posthumanism and decoloniality. In a series of books, starting with the co-edited (with Sinfree Makoni) *Disinventing and reconstituting languages* (2007), this work has sought to ask what language and languages are and why it is important to challenge standard linguistic or applied linguistic answers to this question. From looking at *language as a local practice* (2010) and *language and mobility* (2012), to exploring language from *posthumanist*

(2018a), *Global South* (Pennycook and Makoni, 2020) or *assemblage* (2024a) perspectives, the focus in this work has been to understand the embeddedness of local language practices in social life and to challenge the Western tradition of thinking about language as an abstract entity. Language is something we do rather than a system or structure we draw on. Finally, a range of other work seeks to question and understand urban multilingualism, particularly through the focus on *metrolingualism* (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015). This sociolinguistic orientation explores translanguaging practices in different geopolitical, sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts (particularly in Sydney and Tokyo), seeking to understand ethnographically what kind of local linguistic interactions occur in different parts of the city (cafés, shops, kitchens, construction sites and markets).

3.2 How have your theoretical stances evolved, and what have been the major turning points or challenges in developing your critical perspective on language and education?

Because of what seemed to be deep limitations in applied linguistics to address the questions I wanted to ask – how could we start to think critically about the global spread of English without reducing the question to one of deterministic imposition? – I started developing my own thinking about the global spread of English – not natural, neutral or beneficial (Pennycook, 1994) as some suggested – as well as critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001), bringing critical social and political theory into conversation with language and education. I was greatly helped in this project by a remarkable cohort of graduate students many of whom were seeking similar goals and have gone on to produce highly significant work in the field of language education, most notably Bonny Norton's (2000) work on identity, or Ryuko Kubota and Angel Lin's work on race and ELT (Lin and Kubota 2009). As students, we were also particularly influenced by Weedon's (1987) book on feminism and poststructuralism and work in critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

That's how I started in applied linguistics and started trying to change what was possible in the field. Since then, of course, many things have changed. Over the years, for example, I have been very fortunate in productive collaborations with co-authors, which have changed the way I have thought and developed ideas in new directions. Notable here has been my work with Sinfree Makoni on the philosophy of language and the Global South (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook and Makoni, 2020). This long collaboration started in a restaurant in Japan when a colleague asked him how many languages he spoke. Makoni gently declined an answer on the basis that you can't count languages. There were a number of objections but Makoni stuck to his position, and he and I have been in discussion on this ever since. Also significant has been my long collaboration with Emi Otsuji on urban multilingualism (*metrolingualism*) (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015), from which ideas such as *semiotic assemblages* have developed in our attempt to capture all that is going on in social interactions. My work with Samy Alim and Awad Ibrahim (Alim et al, 2009) opened up the fascinating world of the sociolinguistics of hip hop. More recently Sender Dovchin, Shaila Sultana and I have explored popular culture in Mongolia and Bangladesh (2017). All such collaborations produce much more than the sum of their parts – they create new and dynamic ways of thinking.

4. Future Directions

4.1 What emerging trends or areas of research do you believe are crucial for the future of applied linguistics and language education?

It would be useful to get beyond *linguistic idealism*, with its persistence in viewing languages either as autonomous objects waiting to be discovered and analysed or as abstract systems located in human heads. A significant legacy of the way linguistics developed has been a vision of languages as entities that are identifiable, describable and countable; they are intangible systems that can be discovered (like European voyages of discovery, field linguists have their own stories of finding unknown linguistic entities). We need instead to understand the materiality of language: this is not just a question of possible material effects of language nor of language in context (as if language not in context could mean anything useful), but rather of understanding language as part of the material world. Another significant move would be away from *methodological nationalism* (Schneider, 2018) whereby language data have been tied to nations, and (socio)linguists have assumed too easily a relation between named languages and linguistic resources. This has been the problem with, for example, world Englishes, with its laudable attempt to give greater status to English varieties outside the 'inner circle' and its moves to provincialize

native speakers, while at the same time reinscribing Englishes along national lines (Singapore, Indian, Philippine English and so on).

Long overdue is the need to oppose the *coloniality* of linguistics, with its assumptions about languages based on Eurocentric frames of linguistic thought, an imperative to *delink* from northern notions of decontextualized language and to understand how languages are interwoven with land, lives and surroundings, and may indeed be different things. For Ndhlovu & Makalela (2021, p.17), the focus has to be on decolonising language because “mainstream understandings of multilingualism such as those that underpin multilingual education, mother tongue education, additive bilingual education and multilingual national language policies...exemplify the subtle manifestations of ‘coloniality of language’.” We also need to struggle against *methodological whiteness*, and the failure in applied linguistics “to fully acknowledge the role played by race in the structuring of the world, thereby treating white experience as a universal norm in language learning and teaching” (Makoni, 2021, p.xiii). All of us in applied linguistics have to confront race – language, race and colonialism – in everything we do: our frames of knowledge, professional practices and institutional roles (Kubota and Motha, 2024).

Connected to this has been the constant insistence on *linguistic universalism* not just in the nativist mode of assuming a common underlying linguistic system but in the sense that all languages are divisions of the same thing: language is assumed to be a “metaphysically invariant and ontologically real phenomenon” used by all humans and divided into different but equal recognizable entities (Wee, 2021, p.26). To continue to argue that forms of linguistic universalism provide a barrier against the institutional racism that created hierarchies of racialized languages is to appeal only to commonality and to avoid the necessary struggle to understand difference. The *liberal egalitarian* politics of linguistics need to be challenged, with the assumption that by claiming parity (all languages are equal), we can overcome difference and inequality. Liberalism and its attempt to arrive at equality through sameness is not an adequate underpinning for any critical project.

So too would it be useful to discard *methodological individualism* (Ramberg and Røyneland, 2024) and views that place the individual at the centre of language and assume that an idiolect can be a meaningful concept. Political liberalism, particularly as it developed in the Global North, came to emphasize the individual, individual agency and individual identity so that social categories, from languages to repertoires, have been considered in terms of individual actors rather than the more social understandings that are necessary if we are to grasp categories such as language, which is “a distributed system and not located within an organism” (O’Grady and Bartlett, 2023, p.21). It is also high time to reject the *anthropocentrism* that insists that it is only useful to try to understand language in human terms or that it is language that separates us from other animals. As Cornips (2022) has suggested with respect to the *animal turn* in linguistics, to insist that humans are the only ones engaged with language and to overlook how animals communicate with both human and non-human animals, is to take a particularly narrow position on language and to disregard the moral imperative to come to a more just position with our earthly cohabitants. Multispecies discourse analysis, Lamb (2024) explains, is not only concerned with meaningful interaction between humans and other species, but also with more equitable relations among humans and the world of which we are a part (Pennycook, 2018a).

Understanding languages as linguistic, semiotic or sociomaterial assemblages enables us to start not so much with languages as pregiven entities but as socially distributed practices and possibilities (Pennycook, 2024a). This enables us to start with the local (rather than the universal or national), social action (rather than the individual), the material (rather than the abstract) and the critical (rather than the liberal). We need research that looks at different ways of understanding language, that takes on board southern insights about language chains, communicative repertoires, and the need to pluralize not so much languages as the notion of language itself. If we are to deal with language policies, language education, language discrimination, language in the workplace and so forth, we need an alternative vision of language and languages. We need ways of thinking about the *worldliness* (Pennycook, 1994) of language, about languages not as bounded entities but as *assemblages* (Pennycook, 2024a) that can address matters of linguistic concern in the public domain that are the stuff of everyday and practical linguistic projects.

4.2 What advice would you offer to young researchers who wish to make a meaningful impact in the field of applied linguistics?

First, to become a linguist – whether more or less applied – it is very useful to have worked and lived in a range of different parts of the world so that your knowledge of life and language is diverse. Get out there in the world: travel, talk, learn (and maybe teach) languages. Second, rather than planning a career through qualifications and accumulated knowledge (with all the disciplinary effects such a process can have), it may be more fruitful to take your chances, see what happens and struggle against the knowledge and possibilities presented. I was advised many times not to write so critically, to back off, to be more accommodating (it'll never get published; you'll never get a job), but I wrote from a position of deep dissatisfaction with the knowledge and advice I was given, and decided I didn't care about the consequences (this seemed to work out well enough in the end).

Third, many of the forms of knowledge in linguistics may be inappropriate to your project: an innovative project is going to need new ideas and ways of thinking, so to have anything important to say about language in the world – rather than reproducing existing forms of knowledge by adding to its edges – you will have to do a lot of this yourself by drawing on different fields and frameworks, by reading, exploring, thinking beyond disciplinary boundaries. Fourth, however, you do not necessarily have to do this on your own: Seek out like-minded people and work together towards change. We may on the one hand be at a time when academic work for new scholars has become increasingly precarious (short, part-time, underpaid, contracts) but at the same time we are also at a time when connectivity is much easier than it ever was before. Finally, if, as I did, you need *practical theories of language* (Li Wei, 2018; Pennycook, 2024a), work out how to link questions of locality (what are the local concerns and frameworks that matter?), politics (how is power interwoven with language?), knowledge (what kinds of ideas shed light on what is going on here?) and ethics (how can we decide what should be done?).

5. Broader Implications

5.1 In your view, what role does applied linguistics play in addressing global challenges, such as linguistic inequality, education accessibility, or cultural preservation?

Applied linguistics as commonly understood has done very little to address these topics seriously. When it *has* attempted to address these concerns, it has generally done so from a liberal egalitarian framework, whereby a politics of liberal equality (rather than more radical social change) is the preferred option. Spolsky (2022), for example, argues in favour of a liberal tradition of critical work, objecting to critical race theory (CRT) as a “movement which challenges liberal approaches to racial injustice” (2022, p.11). Liberalism has been the dominant ideology that has accompanied the development of the West (or the Global North) from the 19th century, emphasizing freedom of the individual, a limited role for government, and laissez-faire economics. It is *individualist* (asserting the moral primacy of the individual over any collectivity), *egalitarian* (insisting that all people are equal) and *universalist* (conferring the same moral status on all humans). These are nice ideals but they do not in any real sense engage with the underlying causes of linguistic inequality or education accessibility.

The idea that liberal support for plurality – more languages, more multilingualism – is itself a critical endeavour focuses on diversity for its own sake, yet this “respect for diversity, sensitivity to difference, official antiracism, open societies, and individual (economic) freedom” at the same time “reproduces the existing racial, gender, and class hierarchies of power.” (Kubota, 2016, p.487). As (critical) applied linguists, we need to consider what domains we can influence. In response to Nancy Fraser's (2000) argument (see Block, 2014) that critical work has ignored the *redistribution* of material goods by focusing too much on the *recognition* of minoritized groups – she is surely right about this – it is still worth asking what we as applied linguists can do. We can argue for forms of redistributive justice but we are much more directly able to intervene in forms of recognition. Indeed it is much easier for us to argue the case for the recognition of economic disparity (questions of social class as they intersect with race and gender) than to work towards redistributive goals ourselves. This is a dilemma for applied linguistics that I hope others can work to resolve. While we should not overstate what we can do in these domains – linguistic inequality, education accessibility and cultural preservation are massive sites of disparity – we do have to see critical applied linguistics as a significant player in attempts to address these modes of disenfranchisement.

5.2 How do you see the integration of applied linguistics with other disciplines evolving to address complex societal issues?

As I said, I prefer not to think so much in disciplinary terms. When we draw on new ideas from outside the field, it is often precisely because those fields are developing broad domains of thought. Theories of space, practice or ecology, for example, have been picked up in a range of applied linguistic domains. Common references to cultural and critical geographers are not a result of a new-found interest in traditional domains of geography but because geography has been at the forefront of the spatial turn, and the spatial turn (like the discursive, sensory, somatic and other turns) has influenced many areas. Put another way, the issue is not one of disciplinary borrowing but of engagement with evolving *epistemes* as they influence different areas of study. To develop recent work in posthumanist applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2018a), for example, I drew on geography, philosophy, religion, cognitive science, biology, sociology, political science, and so on, but largely to the extent that writers in these fields were taking up questions related to posthumanism (new materialism, speculative realism, distributed cognition, sensory landscapes, spatial activism, and so on). From proclamations about the death of ‘Man’ to investigations into enhanced forms of being, from the advent of the Anthropocene to new materialism and distributed cognition, the *posthumanist episteme* raises significant questions for applied linguistics in terms of rethinking the relation between humans and all that is deemed non-human (objects, contexts, the environment, animals, and so on). By stepping out of the humanist constructs of culture and nature, the individual and the social, and looking instead at the notion of distributed language and spatial repertoires, we can come to a new understanding of the materiality of language and social action.

The other side of this question concerns the extent to which applied linguistics can inform other areas of work. While the political and methodological tools of critical discourse analysis have certainly had some effect on other domains of the social sciences, such as climate change discourse (Castree, 2014), it is less clear that applied linguistic knowledge is being widely taken up elsewhere. But perhaps this is again to fall into the trap of thinking too much in disciplinary terms. If we view applied linguistics as an *epistemic assemblage*, where *language matters of concern*, *practical theories of language*, and *critical and ethical responses* (Pennycook, 2024a) converge, it is also more possible to see that our multiple alliances – with health workers, lawyers, teachers, translators, pilots and air traffic controllers, Indigenous language activists, students, language policy makers, and many more – render our work part of multilevel forms of teaching, research and activism in a multiplicity of ways. This is not so much about interdisciplinary convergence as multilevel activism.

6. Engagement with Emerging Discourses

Professor Pennycook, in your more recent work, you have engaged deeply with concepts such as the “Global South” and “Translanguaging,” both of which are gaining significant traction within the fields of applied linguistics and beyond. These concepts challenge traditional notions of language use, identity, and power dynamics, particularly in multilingual contexts and developing regions.

6.1 Could you share your perspectives on how these concepts are reshaping our understanding of language education and applied linguistics?

The idea of translanguaging has become remarkably popular over the last decade or so. One problem is that it is used so widely that it can be very hard to know what it means. For some it really is more or less the same as code-switching, so people study forms of mixed language use and call it translanguaging. For others, it means the use of the first language in second language education classes. Some see it as a pedagogical strategy (encouraging teachers to ‘use translanguaging’). While these may all be useful in themselves, they often miss the point that translanguaging challenges the idea of separate languages that many of these ideas still support. Translanguaging has been caught up in a number of unproductive debates, particularly around the idea of unitary competence. Bilinguals, (Otheguy et al, 2018, p25) argue, “have at their disposal a large, full, unitary linguistic system that is not partitioned into the linguistic compartments that schools create.” The proposition of a unitary competence has brought a range of critical responses. Otheguy et al (2018) are right on one level – that schools compartmentalize

languages in ways that can be quite alien to many users – but to posit a unitary competence is to work on the wrong level of language analysis.

Translanguaging is “an approach to bilingualism that is centered, not on languages as has often been the case, but on the practices of bilinguals” (García, 2009, p.140). Translanguaging is a practical theory of language “that comes out of practical concerns of understanding the creative and dynamic practices human beings engage in with multiple named languages and multiple semiotic and cognitive resources” (Li Wei, 2018, p.27). It is concerned with what people do with language. It would be better not to try to get it to fit language models of the Global North with their interest in structures, individuals and internal competence. Translanguaging can be understood as both a questioning of the ways in which named languages are seen as separate, and a questioning of the boundaries around language in general. This suggests the importance both of translingual practices (using elements from what are categorized socially as different languages) and of translingual semiotics (material, spatial and semiotic options). It is a language ideological stance that takes mixed language resources as the norm and questions the ways languages are assumed to operate in separate domains. Translingual projects have focused on “the rights of racialized people to be educated on their own terms and on the basis of their own language practices.” (García et al., 2021, p. 4). For García (2019) the *decolonial* effects of challenging the ways language learners are characterized (first, second, bilingual, limited proficiency and so on) are central to the translingual project. It is on these grounds that I have also suggested that *translingual activism* (Pennycook, 2019) may ground translingual work in more politically activist projects of social change.

6.2 Additionally, how do you envision the integration of these ideas influencing future research directions and pedagogical practices, especially in addressing the complexities of language use in the Global South?

Several other concerns come to the fore when we consider translanguaging in relation to the Global South. The Global South itself sits in a complex relation to concepts such as *decoloniality* (see Pennycook and Makoni, 2020) that I do not want to get into here. The problem when ideas such as translanguaging are transported to Global South contexts is that they can potentially be seen as a new universalizing discourse about language education that should apply everywhere. An overly zealous insistence on first language use in minority language classrooms (particularly when this may mean in a dominant language such as English) may be a regressive step: If a translanguaging focus undermines, say, a Māori-only policy in Māori language classrooms in Aotearoa (New Zealand), it may weaken such language revival projects. Opposing over-enthusiastic engagement with translanguaging may be the “best means of retaining (some) linguistic *autonomy* for Indigenous languages in the classroom (for if not there, where?)” (May, 2022, p.337; emphasis in original). We might still wish to question the whole concept of *linguistic autonomy*, but May has a point here about the potential threat of a new universalizing discourse about language use in the classroom.

There have also been concerns that the focus on translanguaging as a kind of new discovery in the Global North has obscured the point that this is what people have always been doing in the Global South. The revelation that translanguaging is a common practice overlooks common knowledge in the Global South and “astonished southern scholars immersed in complex multilingual societies where horizontal modes of multilingual crossing and fluidity were documented decades earlier” (Windle et al, 2023, p.280). Again, they have a point here as translanguaging becomes a new panacea when teachers may feel this is what they’ve been doing all along. Nonetheless, an open-ended vision of translanguaging as a challenge to normative ideas about language and their separation clearly resonates with how many in contexts such as South Africa view language use, and has great potential – if understood more in ideological than methodological terms – to open up new possibilities for language education. Clearly, ideas such as *ubuntu translanguaging* (Ndhlovu and Makalela, 2021) which relocalize the idea in southern Africa, have great potential for the education of future generations.

7. Reflections and Personal Insights

7.1 Looking back on your career, what do you hope your legacy will be within the field of applied linguistics?

Some see my work as ‘radical’ or at least ‘controversial’. I don’t mind those labels too much though I would be reluctant to apply them to myself (I don’t try to be radical or controversial, it just seems to happen as I ask

questions about things). For others, the distinguishing feature of my work is its volume – I write a lot. This is also true but it frustrates me when people joke about me ‘churning out’ another book, or ask whether I’ve ‘banged out’ another article this week. I probably do write too much but I write because I want to explore ideas. I also try to take a lot of care over my writing. It is carefully crafted. I would probably be happy to be known as a ‘good academic’ (though a fair number of people would object to this proposition because of the challenges I have brought to the field), someone who thinks deeply, writes carefully and reads widely. In that sense I am really more traditional than radical – I adhere to quite conventional academic standards and value intellectual engagement.

But I suppose I would like to be remembered as someone who made a difference, who challenged normative considerations about language and power in the global centre (the Global North) and opened up possibilities for many other people to enter the discussion about what matters in language and education. Looking back over my work I have challenged the global spread of English (1994), teaching methods (1989), common understandings of plagiarism (1996), normative applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001), applied linguistics in the Global North (Pennycook and Makoni, 2020) and much more. My work is widely cited, but often those citations are not so much in Europe or North America as in places like Brazil (where my work has been well received and where I have had the pleasure of speaking on several occasions) or SouthEast Asia, or parts of Africa. It is my hope that these readers see other possibilities in my writing from the global norms, other ways of thinking, alternative options for thinking about language in the world that resonate with their own experiences and make it easier to develop their own ways of thinking about things that concern them.

7.2 How do you balance the demands of your professional life with personal interests or passions outside academia?

Probably not as well as I should, and the separation between personal and professional is often unclear (many of my colleagues are also my friends, and travelling to conferences and meeting up with old acquaintances is both professional and personal at the same time). Since I retired (at least formally), I have been writing a lot, and again this questions the distinction between personal and professional (I write because I enjoy it). But yes, I do have another life, and have always found time to go scuba diving (I do voluntary work surveying reefs in the Philippines), sailing (I own an old sailing boat), cycling (a bike ride to the beach is always good), travelling (I am lucky to have done so much but still I want to do more), and to eat good food (I also like to cook), drink good wine, and enjoy conversations around the world.

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