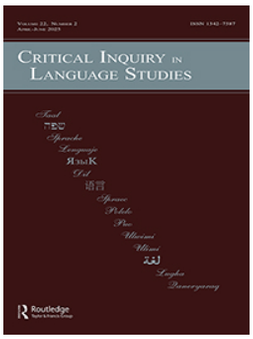

Critical Inquiry in Language Studies

ISSN: 1542-7587 (Print) 1542-7595 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/hcil20

Language, deconstructivism, and the Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa

Alastair Pennycook

To cite this article: Alastair Pennycook (10 Sep 2024): Language, deconstructivism, and the Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, Critical Inquiry in Language Studies, DOI: 10.1080/15427587.2024.2400095

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2024.2400095

CRITICAL INQUIRY IN LANGUAGE STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2024.2400095

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Language, deconstructivism, and the Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa

Alastair Pennycook

International Studies and Education, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

In a series of articles critical of aspects of the idea of translanguaging, MacSwan (e.g. 2022) has suggested that *deconstructivism* has derailed the translingual project. This paper draws attention to a number of weaknesses in this argument that are important for taking critical questions about language seriously. The term deconstructivism operates more as a derogatory label than a description of a theoretical stance, an appeal to popular notions about the postmodern rather than to intellectual debate about modes of inquiry. The notion of deconstruction itself is a common term referring to the need to pull structures apart before reassembling them, as suggested by deconstructivism in architecture (to describe the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, for example). Ontological curiosity about languages also has a long history and is an important step before reconstruction, reinvention, or reconstitution. This paper makes a case for *critical engagement*, an argument for intellectual care when dealing with critical theory, and *critical resistance*, the question of whether contemporary language matters of concern are better served by traditional or current sociolinguistic frameworks.

Introduction

In a series of related articles critical of aspects of the idea of translanguaging, MacSwan (2017, 2020, 2022; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2024) argues that a central problem has been what he calls *deconstructivism*. It is not translanguaging itself that MacSwan critiques – indeed he proposes his own 'multilingual perspective on translanguaging[1]' which 'accepts individual multilingualism as psychologically real' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 322) – but rather what he calls the *deconstructivist* focus within it. This paper draws attention to flaws in this argument that have broader implications for critical work in language studies and the development of meaningful strategies for activism. The term deconstructivism is not one used by any of the proponents of translanguaging critiqued by MacSwan and operates more as a denigratory label than

CONTACT Alastair Pennycook alastair.pennycook@uts.edu.au Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, International Studies and Education, University of Technology Sydney, Ultimo 2007, Sydney, NSW, Australia

a description of a theoretical stance. The tenuous links between deconstruction, philosophical skepticism, and postmodernism operate more as an appeal to popular notions about the postmodern (relativist, ungrounded, nihilist) than to intellectual debate about modes of inquiry.

An *ontologically curious* (Wee, 2021, p. 60) position about language and languages has a long history and is not generally connected to deconstruction. The notion of deconstruction itself is a term in quite popular use, referring to the need to pull structures apart before reassembling them. The work of Derrida, furthemore, to whom deconstruction is often linked, has implications both for applied linguistic work and for critical resistance more generally. As a term commonly used in architecture (to describe the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, for example) deconstructivism does, however, point to the importance of (re)construction. Such ideas, therefore, are rarely used solely for the purpose of disassembling; they are the first stage before the process of reconstruction, reinvention, or reconstitution. This paper is by no means intended as a *defense* of deconstruction, translanguaging, or postmodernism. These all need continued critical assessment. It makes, by contrast, the case for *critical engagement*, an argument that dealing with philosophical movements, critical understanding, and concepts such as ideology requires just as much intellectual rigor as do arguments about language structures, code-switching, or translanguaging. Central to this discussion is the idea of *critical resistance*: Can modernist epistemologies – 'classic linguistic and sociolinguistic research on multilingualism' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 322) for example – do the necessary work to understand multilingualisms in the Global South (Makoni & Pennycook, 2024; Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021), language reclamation in Indigenous communities (Leonard, 2021) or other contemporary language matters of concern?

Deconstruction, postmodernism, wokeism

MacSwan's concern is not with translanguaging itself, since, as a 'conceptual framework,' it 'promotes a positive view of bilingualism, permitting bilinguals to act naturally, using language as they might at home and in their communities' (MacSwan, 2022, p. 17). The story as he tells it is that all was well with early work on translanguaging – 'the classical view of translanguaging theory' (2020, p. 322) in García's (2009) early work – but things went downhill when 'under the influence of deconstructivism, translanguaging was recast as a unitary perspective on multilingualism' (MacSwan, 2022, p. 19). Deconstructivism, MacSwan explains, 'implies that multilingualism and a vast array of related topics on linguistic diversity are fictions' (MacSwan, 2022, p. 17). The idea of deconstructivism is thus performatively realized – 'that discrete languages do not exist is often called deconstructivism' (MacSwan and

Rolstad, 2024, p. 7) – whereby MacSwan's frequent use of the term indicates that skeptical linguistic inquiry is 'often called deconstructivism.'

One problem here is that there is very little mention of deconstruction in any of the works that MacSwan critiques. 'Deconstructing named languages' is part of the title and a subsection header of Otheguy et al.'s (2015) paper that lays out their version of translanguaging, but they have nothing more to say about the concept, and make no connection to Derrida or postmodernism. Although the term deconstruction is often linked to Derrida's (1972) particular philosophical position against forms of essentialism, the term is in quite common use to refer to ways of pulling apart a set of assumptions. Hardt and Negri (2017, p. 225), for example, by no means self-absorbed postmodernists, explain their goal as 'deconstructing the social relations that capitalist money imposes and institutionalizes, and institutionalizing new social relations through a new money.' This is both a theoretical and an activist agenda to undermine the social relations produced and institutionally normalized in capitalist societies.

To take a very different domain, deconstruction is the first stage of the four-part teaching-learning cycle (TLC) of systemic-functional linguistic genre-based approaches to writing pedagogy. This scaffolded model of learning starts with *deconstruction* (modeling) of a sample text, before moving through joint construction (guided practice) and collaborative construction (shared practice) to independent construction (independent practice) (Martin & Rose, 2005). Poststructural or postmodern perspectives are anathema to systemic functional linguists; deconstruction is seen as the first stage in 'scaffolding democracy' in the classroom, coupled to stages of (re)construction. Why, then, if the idea of deconstruction is largely absent (and deconstructivism even more so) in discussions of language ontology, and connections to Derrida or postmodernism[2] are rarely made, does MacSwan invoke the term so often?

By warning us to be wary of deconstruction, postmodernism, and post-structuralism, MacSwan is making an appeal to populist positions against various kinds of work that emphasize diversity. Jordan Peterson has been one of the most vocal in this line of thinking, also suggesting (wrongly) that Derrida was the 'leader of the postmodernists' (Peterson, 2018, p. 306). For Peterson, postmodernism is just the continuation of Marxism in another form, since Derrida 'substituted the idea of power for the idea of money' (2018, p. 310) so that society was not so much the 'repression of the poor by the rich' as 'of everyone by the powerful.' In this strange and erroneous argument, Derrida and 'his post-modern Marxist acolytes' (p. 311) suggest that society is nothing but a struggle between opposing groups and that 'there are no facts' (p. 311). Peterson uses these arguments to dismiss ideas such as patriarchy and to deride the idea that 'men, rather than nature, were the primary source of the oppression of women' (p. 313).

Peterson's (2018) dangerous ideas have been widely critiqued and debunked. 'How did mentions of race become postmodern?' Brabazon (2022, p. 1) asks. We might similarly ask how discussions of language and racialized minorities (García et al., 2021) became postmodern. Peterson was shown in his debate with Slavoj Žižek to know 'nothing about Marxism or postmodernism' (Brabazon, 2022 p. 2), and if he still remained in the public eye, the intellectual label had become a misnomer. To invoke deconstructivism or postmodernism in this way is akin to critiques of 'leftliberal identity politics, social-justice activism or, simply, wokeness' (Spolsky, 2022, p. 12). Just as this use of 'woke' (again, not a term used by many social justice activists themselves) undermines serious political causes and 'shields existing power structures from criticism so that they do not face any real challenge' (Rhodes, 2022, p. 7), so deconstructivist/postmodernist labels avoid serious engagement with ideas by deflecting critiques of normative ideologies.[3] We have already seen critical applied linguistics denied inclusion in *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (Kaplan, 2002) on the grounds that it brings 'into applied linguistics a postmodern view of knowledge and of the ways in which it is socially constructed' (Davies, 1999, p. 126). Such labels are unhelpful if we are to engage with ontological questions about language.

Inventions and ontological curiosity

The argument that it was only when deconstructivist work started to influence translanguaging that things went awry overlooks the much longer history of ontological skepticism about language and languages. Some 50 years ago, for example, in his introduction to applied linguistics, Corder (1973, p. 27) warned of the dangers of following a 'linguistic approach to language' since it is the 'most objectivizing. But language is not, after all, a thing with real existence.' Since linguistics defines itself in no small measure around the idea of separate and comparable languages as describable entities, linguists have tended to tiptoe around this problem. For applied linguists, philosophers, and many others, however, the ontological status of language and languages has always been a topic in need of serious discussion (Ortega, 2018; Santana, 2016). For the neopragmatist philosopher Davidson (1986, p. 446), 'there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed.' From an integrationist perspective, 'linguistics does not need to postulate the existence of languages as part of its theoretical apparatus' (Harris, 1990, p. 45). A universal grammarian viewpoint may also be skeptical about the usefulness of the notions of languages, which 'are not real world objects but are artificial, somewhat arbitrary, and perhaps not very interesting constructs' (Chomsky, 1986, p. 26). Questions about what language is, or what languages are, or how the two are related, are a necessary part of any *ontologically curious* (as opposed to ontologically naïve) position

'that takes seriously rather than skirts the question of just how languages, including standard English and its non-standard counterparts, are constituted' (Wee, 2021, p. 60).

Although this concern with the obvious problems with the status of 'languages' as commonly conceived along *methodologically nationalist* lines (Schneider, 2018) has been met by a rather panicked response that it signals the end of bilingualism or language education (MacSwan, 2020, 2022), ontological curiosity does not imply that language-learning practices and policies will somehow cease to occur. It challenges the grounds on which they are understood. Such a position, Wee explains, 'avoids taking the name of a variety at face value' and 'refrains from accusing those who wish to inquire into the nature of a variety as "enemies"' (2021, p.60). When Makoni and I pointed out that languages do not exist as pre-formed entities in the world but are, by contrast, 'the inventions of social, cultural and political movements' (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 2), we were drawing attention to the ways that languages are created, constructed, or assembled (Pennycook, 2024).

Although some versions of this argument have perhaps lacked ontological clarity (not always making it clear that it was languages as autonomous entities in the world that were being questioned), the argument has generally been understood to focus on the social construction of languages. This is not to deny that languages very obviously have a social existence, that they exist as social and political ideas, but rather to question what kind of existence they have beyond this observation. As Li (2018, p. 27) explains, translanguaging 'does not deny the existence of named languages, but stresses that languages are historically, politically, and ideologically defined entities.' García et al. (2021, p. 207) likewise affirm 'unequivocally that languages do exist, and that they are socially constructed realities.' The argument, from an ontologically curious perspective, is about what it is that exists rather than whether it exists. As Cummins (2021) suggests, neither the social construction of languages nor their reality for students, teachers, politicians, and most people is under dispute. Aside from MacSwan's (2022) assertion that critical constructivists see languages as social fictions rather than social facts, there appears to be little disagreement here that languages are social constructions that are very real.

To talk of languages as *inventions* is to draw on a long tradition of critical historical and philosophical work. Mudimbe's (1988, p. 10) classic *The Invention of Africa* critiques the ways 'Western interpreters as well as African analysts have been using categories and conceptual systems which depend on a Western epistemological order.' This does not mean there is no such region of the world as Africa, so that one could sail uninterrupted from New York to Mumbai without either passing through the Suez Canal or rounding Cape Agulhas. Nor does it mean that 'pan-Africanist' politics are meaningless. It asks, by contrast, how Africa came to mean what it means and

who gets to interpret the many forms of knowledge that emanate from its diverse societies. Like many similar projects, from Anderson's (1983) notion of *imagined communities*, to the invention of national dishes (von Bremzen, 2023), Jewish people (Sand, 2009) or Roma people and their language (Bogdal, 2023; Canut, 2011), the argument is not that these do not exist but that we need to understand how their existence came about in particular times and places, often within 19th and 20th century nationbuilding, tying nations to languages, cultures and ethnicities. Disinvention (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) is intended as a means to question such inventions, as a form of resistance, akin to Haslanger's (2012) notion of *resisting reality*. For Haslanger, gender and race (and language) are socially constructed, which means both that they are real and that they can and need to be resisted. Resisting reality is by no means a rejection of reality, but rather identifying those things we may think have some reality beyond the social, and looking at how they can be resisted. This takes us to the discussion of critical resistance.

Critical resistance

Deconstructivism, in MacSwan's (2020, p. 326) view, refers to a postmodernist/poststructuralist perspective 'largely defined in opposition to the classical ideals of the Enlightenment and modernism' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 326). In many ways, this is a reiteration of the continuing debates as to how well the intellectual tools and methods of enlightenment and European modernity serve us in the 21st century once questions have been raised about the provinciality and particularity of such thinking. On the one hand, a defense of 'classic linguistic and sociolinguistic research on multilingualism' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 322); on the other hand, a critical poststructuralist sociolinguistics (García et al., 2017) that seeks social change through alternative modes of inquiry. At the heart of MacSwan's concerns, therefore, is an important question as to whether a critical sociolinguistic approach 'is a better strategy for achieving social justice' than a more traditional 'linguistic and sociolinguistic approach of challenging standard language ideology using empirical inquiry to expose such ideologies' (MacSwan, 2022, p. 37). While MacSwan and Rolstad (2024) insist that this is centrally an empirical question – traditional 'grounded' sociolinguistics uses empirical research, while critical 'ungrounded' sociolinguistics does not (a claim that is evidently itself ungrounded) – the central issue is between which set of ideological, research, and activist practices better serves linguistic concerns.

The negative appraisal of Derrida and others deemed postmodernist by MacSwan (2022) overlooks the importance of his work both for applied linguistics in particular and for critical orientations more generally. For O'Grady and Bartlett (2023), Derrida's (1973) concept of *différance*, where meaning is both defined structurally in terms of

difference but also deferred into the future, is closely linked to an understanding of *emergence*, where grammar 'never exists as such but is always coming into being' (Kretzschmar, 2015, p. 58). Rather than internalized notions of grammars in the head waiting to be used, emergent or practice-based accounts of language suggest that grammars and languages more generally are always being reassembled (Wee, 2021). For McNamara (2019), Derrida's discussion of the *shibboleth* is a reminder of the social and political functions of language tests for inclusion and exclusion. This challenges language testing theory's attempts to remove the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the test score, to yield a true reading of what a score means, suggesting that test scores are *undecidables* 'open to interpretation, inherently unstable' with huge potential for benefit or harm (2019, p.209).

In *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (monolingualism of the Other), Derrida (1996) asks what it means to speak one's *own* language – 'I have only one language, it is not mine' (Derrida, 1996, p. 1) – in contexts where that language is also part of the denial of one's being (an Algerian Jew recognized and then denied by the French state). He questions what it means as a Jewish-French-Maghrebi to grow up speaking only French, a language alien to the context of his upbringing, a language that made it impossible to study other languages such as Berber, Arabic, Hebrew, or Ladino. What does such recognition and exclusion entail? McNamara asks (2019). *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* is a book about language and race, the 'countability' of languages (that is, their discreteness or factual givenness), and language and colonialism. For Derrida, while, on the one hand, we may struggle with the idea of a mother tongue, and our relation to our strongest language may be ambivalent – particularly in contexts of colonialism – on the other hand, we never speak only one language. This is perhaps not so distant from MacSwan's multilingual perspective on translanguaging whereby we are 'not all individually monolingual but rather multilingual, with rich internal diversity' (MacSwan, 2017, p. 190) or Brigitta Busch's (2012) contention that '*niemand ist einsprachig*' (no one is monolingual).

Derrida is seen by those who want meaning to be stable, truth to be easily defined, and morals to be absolute as a subversive nihilist who insisted that truth was fiction, that meaning was totally open, and that there was nothing beyond writing. Deconstruction is about reading against the grain of supposedly self-evident truths, rather than taking them for granted. Derrida's thinking, along with others such as Foucault, is of great significance for ideas such as *critical resistance* (Hoy, 2004). One of MacSwan's (2020, p. 321) concerns is that a translingual perspective is 'at odds with a civil rights orientation, the backbone of language education policy in the United States.' From this perspective if critical constructivism undermines the status of languages without providing a normative position based on the terms laid down by language

policy over the last few decades as part of a civil rights orientation, it does not provide an adequate political position for critical work.

This concern is part of a much wider argument within critical theory. To what extent do we need to maintain certain normative values by which we can judge the proposals for and effects of critique and to what extent by doing so do we reproduce the frameworks that contribute to the initial critique in the first place? For some, such as Habermas, while critical theory – a tradition to which he is a contemporary successor – could do useful work in questioning social and political hierarchies, without a normative theory (such as his own *communicative action;* 1984) critical work cannot provide a direction for action or a means to evaluate whether current practices can meet their critical goals. The quandary here, as Butler (2002) explains in her response to Foucault's (1997) paper 'What is critique?' is to find ways neither to end up without a place to stand nor to reproduce current politics and epistemologies. What is the use of *thinking otherwise* – *penser autrement*, from Foucault – Butler (2002) asks, if we don't know in advance that such thinking will produce a better world, if we do not have a moral and political framework – Habermas' communicative action or MacSwan's civil rights – from which to determine with certitude whether new ways of thinking will produce a better world that we can judge with already established standards? Yet how, she continues, can we avoid the problem that such epistemological certainties support ways of structuring the world that foreclose alternative possibilities?

To assume a normative moral and political framework, to use forms of critical work that do not challenge the frameworks of thinking that are part of the inequity in the first place, may do more to reproduce than oppose those conditions. Normative frameworks 'presuppose the patterns of oppression that they are resisting' (Hoy, 2004, p. 3). To develop an effective critical resistance, we need a line of critical thought (via Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault) that insists that such resistance 'requires freedom, and freedom is tied conceptually to the openness to possibility' (Hoy, 2004, p. 234). While offering significant critiques of and partial solutions to linguistic inequalities, linguistic imperialism, language rights, or world Englishes still operate from within those frameworks that need to be challenged (Rajagopalan, 1999). Framing local linguistic demands through the language of human rights at a global level 'may merely be affirming the global vision projected by American liberal democracy' (Sonntag, 2003, p. 25). That is to say, to insist that language policy as defined within the US civil rights tradition is the only way forward is to reproduce the very conditions of inequality that we seek to challenge. It is in opposition to this global vision of American liberal ideology that many decolonial ideas have developed.

The argument that to challenge languages as commonly defined is at odds with a civil rights orientation (MacSwan, 2020, p. 321) is akin to suggesting that because affirmative action programs are based around common

understandings of race and gender in the USA, we should not therefore question the ways race and gender are understood. Surely, we need at the very least to work from both perspectives: political action to rectify contemporary injustices along the lines that have been laid down in the past and at the same time critical inquiry into the ways such differences have been constructed. MacSwan (2020) claims that normativity is anathema to linguistics, yet he clearly argues for a normative view of linguistics generally ('consistent with classic linguistic and sociolinguistic research'), a normative vision of code-switching – while Auer (2022) rejects the equation of codes with languages, MacSwan (2017, p. 168) defines code-switching as 'a speech style in which bilinguals alternate languages between or within sentences' – and a normative politics based on civil rights in the USA. At the very least, such normative stances should not have the last word in determining how we should go about our linguistics or politics. More generally, these stances will always tend toward the reproduction of the status quo. To avoid the recolonizing of thought by insisting on concepts of languages and language rights that reproduce the social order, we need to think differently.

Reclaiming languages

A common concern in the critiques of critical sociolinguistics is that to question the status of named languages is to undermine language revival projects, which, very obviously, are organized around the naming of languages and communities (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2024). This argument misses the point, however, that many such projects – particularly from a *language reclamation* perspective (Leonard, 2021) – are seeking to redefine language in the process. This is about the imperative to 'delink from Western notions of "language" as decontextualized and instead think of language as interwoven with bodies and land, and in this sense, alive' (Hermes et al., 2022, p. 26). As Henne-Ochoa et al. (2020, p. 482) make clear, non-Indigenous linguists working with Indigenous communities 'tend to conceive of language as an object,' as a 'thing,' as a code separable from its context, emphasizing 'structural properties,' so that languages can be turned into dictionaries, grammars, and texts. While linguistics 'draws heavily from Native American languages' as part of its *extractivist* project to mine the natural resources of the Global South, at the same time it 'normalizes colonial ways of defining, valuing, and analyzing them,' overlooking 'Native American communities' ways of defining and engaging with language conceptually' (Leonard, 2021, p. 224).

The problem, as Ennis (2020, p. 305) explains, is how 'Euro-derived notions' of language 'interface with Indigenous understandings of the nature of language in revitalization projects.' For Mufwene (2020, p. 290) the idea of *decolonial linguistics* 'entails reducing the Western bias and hegemony in how languages of the global South and the (socio) linguistic behaviours of their

speakers and writers are analysed.' De Souza (2017, p. 206) suggests that while some researchers claim a 'pro-indigenous' stance 'in favour of the preservation of indigenous languages and epistemologies,' too much of this thinking remains 'trapped within the bounds of their own Enlightenment epistemologies.' When these researchers 'claim to listen to the indigenous other, they apparently only hear their own voices and values,' thereby wasting 'the wealth of experience of the ecology of knowledges that surrounds them but remains invisible to their eyes.' Language activist-scholars, by contrast, have asserted their own community ways of thinking about language, questioning the power linguists hold to 'define, describe, and control the fate of Indigenous languages,' and calling instead for the need to decolonize standard ways of considering what language is (Leonard, 2021, p. 223). This is about assumptions of expertise, superior knowledge about language, and the coloniality of knowledge.

Grasping the challenges to linguistic orthodoxies presented by translinguistic perspectives can open up new alternatives for the understanding of language diversity. Indigenous language practices in Arnhem Land (North Australia), for example, are characterized 'by diversity, flexibility, fluidity, and the depth and nuance of linguistic repertoires.' Such 'translingual practices' are the 'ordinary and unremarkable . . . stuff of everyday communication in peripheral communities' (Vaughan, 2020, p. 99). Unlike 'mainstream approaches that proceed through counting putative language-things,' an approach to multilingualism that starts with language practices and experiences 'holds the promise for decolonising the field of study' (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021, p. 173). By defending 'classic linguistic and sociolinguistic research on multilingualism' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 322) – the kind of research that is seen as precisely the problem from a decolonial perspective – and suggesting that postmodernist or poststructuralist modes of inquiry have detrimentally informed translingual research, MacSwan downplays this *decolonial imperative* to question the colonial construction of languages (Errington, 2008) and to pursue alternative ways of thinking about language. A growing body of work has been questioning normative assumptions that define languages along traditional (socio)linguistic lines, projects that are decolonial before they are postmodern.

Competence, idiolects, and practices

The central concern of much of MacSwan's and others' (e.g. Cummins, 2021) critique of translanguaging focuses on the idea of unitary competence, 'the deconstructivist thesis as applied to individual bilingualism' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 322). Otheguy et al. (2015) insist that however languages may be socially described, they derive from one internal linguistic system, so the 'dual ontology of the two separable named languages is anchored in sociocultural beliefs,

not in psycholinguistic properties of the underlying system' (Otheguy et al., 2018, p. 628). This is problematic for MacSwan (2017) since the psycholinguistic reality of multilingualism is recast as an underlying unitary capacity, whereas in his view multilingual people have an integrated linguistic system with both shared and discrete components. This is not, in my view, a productive dispute since it rests on dubious premises on both sides.

MacSwan suggests that the focus on idiolects derives from a postmodern focus that questions grand narratives, essentialised identities, and moral absolutes, leading to a 'commitment to doubt, incredulity and relativism' (MacSwan, 2022, p. 33). Thus, 'the logic of deconstruction affects all notions of linguistic community, reducing each of us to lone language users in possession of a unique idiolect' (MacSwan, 2020, p. 329). This is misleading on two counts. First, the point in seeing truth, morality, and knowledge not as absolutes but as socially dependent is not at all to argue for a form of relativism but rather for critical work to shed light on how it is we understand things in the way we do, for local forms of knowledge and linguistic ethnographic approaches to understanding language practices. The absolute-relative divide is a product of modernist epistemology and the idea that postmodern/poststructuralist thought is hopelessly relative is a discredited claim of modernist ideology. Second, the focus on idiolects in the work of Otheguy et al. (2018) is derived not from postmodern or poststructural thought but from orthodox linguistics.

Indeed, although Otheguy et al. (2015) draw distinctions between Chomskyan I-language and their own take on idiolects (their version of idiolect is primarily acquired and used in social interaction), it is not very different from either Chomskyan or MacSwan's versions. Aside from the question as to how many languages are represented in the head, both are traditional aspects of linguistic thought, an idiolect or I-language being 'the actual grammar, lexis, phonology etc., that we each carry around in our heads' (Hall, 2020, p. 17). This is a view of language from an 'internal perspective of the individual' that differs from an 'external perspective of the society' and is made up of 'lists of lexical and grammatical features' (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 289), so that the 'only thing anyone actually speaks is his or her own idiolect, something that no one else speaks' (p. 294). Idiolects, from this way of thinking, are individual language competencies, collections of individual lexical and structural features that preexist their instantiation as named languages.

This focus on competence and the individual is problematic in two respects: First, it conflates structural and practice-based ontologies of language (Demuro & Gurney, 2021; Pennycook, 2024). The focus of work on translingual practices was originally 'on bilingualism that is centered, not on languages as has often been the case, but on the practices of bilinguals' (García, 2009, p. 140). The question was what people did with their linguistic resources rather

than what kind of capacity exists between their ears. If anything, then, the move from the early to more recent work on translanguaging suggests a shift from practice back to structure, a shift influenced by orthodox linguistics far more than poststructuralism. Second, this falls into the trap of assuming individual human agents to be 'the repository of language competence' (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 207). This *methodological individualism* gives ontological priority to the individual and rests on western liberal assumptions about agency, freedom, and society. It is a cornerstone of liberal-linguistic thought in need of critical investigation.

Understanding languages as social practices suggests by contrast that language is 'a dialogical phenomenon and is not therefore the possessions of individual brains and bodies' (Thibault, 2011, p. 214). Since the primary function of language has always been communication (*pace* Chomsky), it is better understood as 'a distributed system and not located within an organism' (O'Grady & Bartlett, 2023, p. 21). As Hutchins (2014, p. 37) reminds us, while 'language is clearly a cognitive accomplishment,' it is 'not one that is accomplished by any individual.' The emergence of a language, he explains, is 'a cognitive process that takes place in an evolving cognitive ecosystem that includes a shared world of objects and events as well as adaptive resources internal to each member of the community.' This does not mean we do not use language on some personal level or that we all speak in the same way – obviously we do not – but to posit idiolects as somehow fundamental to linguistics is to misunderstand the sociality of language.

Reescrever, reinventar, reestartar a própria ideia de linguagem

That translanguaging should be subject to critical scrutiny should not be in question, particularly when it is proposed as a universal panacea to linguistic matters of concern. There are many good reasons to be skeptical about projects under the label of translanguaging (Sah & Kubota, 2022). Yet such critical investigation is not helped by labels such as deconstructivism or claims that translingual perspectives are informed by ungrounded ideological perspectives. There is a strange irony in the observation that deconstructivism is more commonly used as a term from architecture rather than a description of a form of philosophical inquiry. Although the so-called deconstructivists – Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Bernard Tschumi, and others – were indeed influenced by Derrida's deconstruction, like all architects they were focused on construction. An architectural movement that sought only to pull buildings apart without putting something else in their place would be a movement of limited appeal. By emphasizing what he sees as the deconstructivist tendencies of critical sociolinguistics, MacSwan overlooks the reconstructive elements of critical theory.

Just as genre pedagogies suggest we need to pull texts apart in order to understand what is going on in them before they are reassembled collaboratively, so critical constructivists have always argued that critical work needs both an ontological curiosity and a reconstructive agenda. In our discussion of *disinvention* (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007), for example, we also emphasized what we called *reconstitution*, the need to consider how we can reassemble languages once we have questioned some of the problematic assumptions that underpin their status. Translanguaging arguably is one of the means to do this kind of reassembling, a practical theory of language (Li, 2018) that derives from people's needs and interests around language. To the extent that such reassemblages may be emergent from the struggles to develop alternative ways of working with language beyond the traditional, they can be important tools in political struggles.

The buildings that deconstructivists design challenge typical box-like structures in favor of radically different architectural forms; rather than dressing up their buildings with new ornamentations (as postmodern architecture tends to do), they seek to create buildings with different structures. If a museum can look like the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum – a series of diversely shaped, interconnected structures – what can a language look like? Critical projects that have sought to question forms of discrimination, poverty, or the status of languages, have almost all put forward alternative projects of reconstruction, reconstitution, or reassemblage. Given that 'what we think of as language is being constantly assembled and reassembled through the joint contributions of humans, technologies and inherited conventions of language use' (Wee, 2021, p. 39), it is incumbent on critical sociolinguists to investigate these reassemblages. Just as we should look critically at deconstructivist architecture (public housing projects might be more appropriate[4]), so we should look critically at what is produced in new language assemblages, and appreciate that languages may not all be versions of the same thing (Pennycook, 2024). As Black Brazilian activist Muniz (2021, p. 286) argues, when one is defined by one's race, and one's linguistic identity (Pretuguês) is denied, the only option is to struggle: 'Gingar com as palavras da mesma forma que ginga com a vida. Reescrever, reinventar, reestartar a própria ideia de linguagem. (Spar with words the same way you spar with life. Rewrite, reinvent, reset the very idea of language.) (citation and translation in Windle & Nascimento, 2025, p. 267). This is the struggle we are faced with – to reinvent language amid political struggle – and it is unlikely that this challenge can be met by the tired tools of yesteryear.

Notes

1. Some have observed that the notion of multilingual translanguaging is contradictory since 'far from being a multi-lingual process,' translanguaging 'is really the very opposite' (Widdowson & Seidlhofer, 2024, p. 27).
2. MacSwan makes much of my claim that 'we no longer need to maintain the pernicious myth that languages exist' (Pennycook, 2006, p. 67) in a paper that overtly connects postmodernism and language policy (I was asked to write a paper that looked at language policy from this perspective). It is perhaps rightly cited as an overly strident statement, though the rest of that quote, suggesting 'we can start to develop an anti-foundationalist view of language as an emergent property of social interaction and not a prior system tied to ethnicity, territory, birth, or nation' points to the broadly shared understanding of languages as social constructs.
3. Critiques of postmodernism are also linked to the long battle between Anglo-Saxon (analytic) and the different styles, interests, and language of other European philosophers: The opposition by Cambridge University philosophers to Derrida's honorary degree epitomized this struggle.
4. I would have preferred the money spent on a Gehry-designed Faculty of Business at my former university to have been used for more evident educational purposes (staff and student support and welfare, research, and so on).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.

Auer, P. (2022). 'Translanguaging' or 'Doing languages'? Multilingual practices and the notion of 'codes. In J. MacSwan (Ed.), *Multilingual Perspectives on Translanguaging* (pp. 131–159). Multilingual Matters.

Bogdal, K.-M. (2023). *Europe and the Roma: A history of fascination and fear (Europa erfindet die Zigeuner)* (J. Chase, Ed. & Trans.). Allen Lane.

Brabazon, T. (2022). *12 rules for (academic) life: A stroppy feminist's guide through teaching, learning, politics, and Jordan Peterson*. Springer.

Busch, B. (2012). *Das sprachlige Repertoire oder Niemand ist Einsprachig. Vorlesung zum Antritt der Berta-Karlik-Professur an der Universität Wien*. Drava.

Butler, J. (2002). What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue. In D. Ingram (Ed.), *The political: Readings in continental philosophy* (pp. 212–226). Basil Blackwell.

Canagarajah, S. (2021). Materialising semiotic repertoires: Challenges in the interactional analysis of multilingual communication. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *18*(2), 206–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2021.1877293

Canut, C. (2011). La langue romani: une fiction historique. *Langage et Société*, *n° 136*(2), 55–80. https://doi.org/10.3917/ls.136.0055

Chomsky, N. (1986). *Knowledge of language*. Praeger Publishers.

Corder, S. P. (1973). *Introducing applied linguistics*. Penguin.

Cummins, J. (2021). Translanguaging – a critical analysis of theoretical claims. In P. Juvonen & M. Källkvist (Eds.), *Pedagogical translanguaging : Theoretical, methodological and empirical perspectives* (pp. 7–36). Multilingual Matters.

Davidson, D. (1986). A nice derangement of epitaphs. In E. Lepore (Ed.), *Truth and interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson* (pp. 433–446). Blackwell.

Davies, A. (1999). *An introduction to applied linguistics: From theory to practice*. Edinburgh University Press.

Demuro, E., & Gurney, L. (2021). Languages/Languaging as world-making: The ontological bases of language. *Language Sciences*, *83*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2020.101307

Derrida, J. (1972). *La dissémination*. Seuil.

Derrida, J. (1973). *Speech and phenomena and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*. In D. Allison (Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

Derrida, J. (1996). *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre ou la prothèse d'origine.* Galilée, *(Monolingualism of the other or the prosthesis of origin*. In P. Mensah (Trans.). Stanford University Press: University Press.

De Souza, L. M. (2017). Epistemic diversity, lazy reason, and ethical translation in postcolonial contexts. The case of indigenous educational policy in Brazil. In C. Kerfoot & K. Hyltenstam (Eds.), *Entangled discourses: South-north orders of visibility* (pp. 189–208). Routledge.

Ennis, G. (2020). Linguistic natures: Method, media, and language reclamation in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *30*(3), 304–325. https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12281

Errington, J. (2008). *Linguistics in a colonial world: A story of language, meaning and power*. Blackwell.

Foucault, M. (1997). What is critique? In S. Lotringer & L. Hochroth (Eds.), *The politics of truth* (pp. 27–82). Semiotext(e).

García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Basil Blackwell.

García, O., Flores, N., Seltzer, K., Li, L., Otheguy, R., & Rosa, J. (2021). Rejecting abyssal thinking in the language and education of racialized bilinguals: A manifesto. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *18*(3), 203–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2021.1935957

García, O., Flores, N., & Spotti, M. (2017). Language and society: A critical poststructuralist perspective. In O. García, N. Flores, & M. Spotti (Eds.), *The oxford handbook of language and society* (pp. 1–16). Oxford University Press.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (T. McCarthy, Ed. & Trans.). Beacon Press.

Hall, C. (2020). An ontological framework for English. In C. J. Hall & R. Wicaksono (Eds.), *Ontologies of English. Reconceptualising the language for learning, teaching, and assessment* (pp. 13–36). Cambridge University Press.

Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2017). *Assembly*. Oxford University Press.

Harris, R. (1990). On redefining linguistics. In H. Davis & T. Taylor (Eds.), *Redefining linguistics* (pp. 18–52). Routledge.

Haslanger, S. (2012). *Resisting reality: Social construction and social critique*. Oxford University Press.

Henne-Ochoa, R., Elliot-Groves, E., Meek, B., & Rogoff, B. (2020). Pathways forward for indigenous language reclamation: Engaging indigenous epistemology and learning by observing and pitching in to family and community endeavors. *The Modern Language Journal*, *104*(2), 481–493. https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12652

Hermes, M., Engman, M., McKenzie, M., & McKenzie, J. (2022). Relationality and ojibwemowin in forest walks: Learning from multimodal interaction about land and language. *Cognition & Instruction*, *41*(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2022.2059482

Hoy, D. (2004). *Critical resistance: From poststructuralism to post-critique*. The MIT Press.

Hutchins, E. (2014). The cultural ecosystem of human cognition. *Philosophical Psychology*, *27* (1), 34–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2013.830548

Kaplan, R. (2002). Preface. In R. Kaplan (Ed.), *The oxford handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. i–xxvii). Oxford University Press.

Kretzschmar, W. (2015). *Language and complex systems*. Cambridge University Press.

Leonard, W. (2021). Toward an anti-racist linguistic anthropology: An indigenous response to white supremacy. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *31*(2), 218–237. https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12319

Li, W. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, *39*(1), 9–30. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx039

MacSwan, J. (2017). A multilingual perspective on translanguaging. *American Educational Research Journal*, *54*(1), 167–201. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216683935

MacSwan, J. (2020). Translanguaging, language ontology, and civil rights. *World Englishes*, *39* (2), 321–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12464

MacSwan, J. (2022). Introduction: Deconstructivism – a reader's guide. In J. MacSwan (Ed.), *Multilingual perspectives on translanguaging* (pp. 17–55). Multilingual Matters.

MacSwan, J., & Rolstad, K. (2024). (Un)grounded language ideologies: A brief history of translanguaging theory. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *28*(4), 719–743. https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069241236703

Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (2007). Disinventing and reconstituting languages. In S. Makoni & A. Pennycook (Eds.), *Disinventing and reconstituting languages* (pp. 1–41). Multilingual Matters.

Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (2024). Looking at multilingualisms from the global south. In C. McKinney, P. Makoe, & V. Zavala (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of multilingualism* (2nd ed. pp. 17–30). Routledge.

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2005). Designing literacy pedagogy: Scaffolding democracy in the classroom. In R. Hasan, C. Matthiessen, & J. J. Webster (Eds.), *Continuing discourse on language: A functional perspective* (pp. 252–280). Equinox.

McNamara, T. (2019). *Language and subjectivity*. Cambridge University Press.

Mudimbe, V. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge*. James Currey.

Mufwene, S. (2020). Decolonial linguistics as paradigm shift: A commentary. In A. Deumert, A. Storch, & N. Shepherd (Eds.), *Colonial and decolonial linguistics: Knowledges and Epistemes* (pp. 289–300). Oxford University Press.

Muniz, K. (2021). Linguagem como mandinga: população negra e periférica reinventando epistemologias. In A. L. Souza (Ed.), *Cultura política nas periferias: estratégias de reexistência* (pp. 273–288). Fundação Perseu Abramo.

Ndhlovu, F., & Makalela, L. (2021). *Decolonising multilingualism in Africa: Recentering silenced voices from the global south*. Multilingual Matters.

O'Grady, G., & Bartlett, T. (2023). *The language dynamic*. Equinox.

Ortega, L. (2018). Ontologies of language, second language acquisition, and world englishes. *World Englishes*, *37*(1), 64–79. https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12303

Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *6*(3), 281–307. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2015-0014

Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2018). A translanguaging view of the linguistic system of bilinguals. *Applied Linguistics Review*, *10*(4), 625–651. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2018-0020

Pennycook, A. (2006). Postmodernism and language policy. In T. Ricento (Ed.), *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method* (pp. 60–76). Blackwell.

Pennycook, A. (2024). *Language assemblages*. Cambridge University Press.
Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life: An antidote to chaos*. Random House Canada.
Rajagopalan, K. (1999). Of EFL teachers, conscience and cowardice. *ELT Journal*, *53*(3), 200–206. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/53.3.200
Rhodes, C. (2022). *Woke capitalism: How corporate morality is sabotaging democracy*. Bristol University press.
Sah, P. K., & Kubota, R. (2022). Towards critical translanguaging: A review of literature on English as a medium of instruction in South Asia's school education. *Asian Englishes*, *24*(2), 132–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/13488678.2022.2056796
Sand, S. (2009). *The invention of the Jewish people*. In Y. Lotan (Trans.). Verso.
Santana, C. (2016). What is language? *Ergo: an Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, *3*(19), 501–523. https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0003.019
Schneider, B. (2018). Methodological nationalism in linguistics. *Language Sciences*, *76*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2018.05.006
Sonntag, S. (2003). *The local politics of global English: Case studies in linguistic globalization*. Lexington Books.
Spolsky, B. (2022). Do we need critical educational linguistics? *Educational Linguistics*, *1*(1), 4–24. https://doi.org/10.1515/eduling-2021-0003
Thibault, P. (2011). First-order languaging dynamics and second-order language: The distributed language view. *Ecological Psychology*, *23*(3), 1–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/10407413.2011.591274
Vaughan, J. (2020). The ordinariness of translinguistics in Indigenous Australia. In J. W. Lee & S. Dovchin (Eds.), *Translinguistics: Negotiating innovation and ordinariness* (pp. 90–103). Routledge.
von Bremzen, A. (2023). *National dish: Around the world in search of food, history and the meaning of home*. Pushkin Press.
Wee, L. (2021). *Posthumanist world englishes*. Cambridge University Press.
Widdowson, H., & Seidlhofer, B. (2024). Conceptualising ELF and applied linguistics. In K. Murata (Ed.), *ELF and applied linguistics: Reconsidering applied linguistics research from ELF perspectives* (pp. 21–33). Routledge.
Windle, J., & Nascimento, G. (2025). From linguistic resistance to re-existence: Pretuguês as an anti-racist perspective on language. In F. Ndhlovu & S. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (Eds.), *Language and decolonisation: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp. 257–270). Routledge.