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Critically Real Approaches to Language Diversity and Education Research

David Corson

In spite of their recency, neither applied linguistics nor sociolinguistics has been much affected by developments in the philosophy of social research, especially by the critical realism that is now influential. This omission is partly because there was enough for researchers to do, just setting out aims and scope, and building a resource of studies, while these new language disciplines were establishing themselves. Also, resistance to developments in mainstream social research theory is common in all disciplines because adherents to any language game, like a discipline, tend to resist pressures to change their game if the impetus for change comes from outside their known conceptual framework. And, even though most of the research on language diversity and education has been done by people working in applied linguistics or in sociolinguistics, many in those disciplines have reservations about the limitations of their fields of inquiry for doing present-day studies. The reasons for this ambivalence are evident in the short histories of these disciplines.

In this paper I discuss some changes currently impacting language diversity and education research practices. I outline critical realism as a philosophy, and relate it to influential ideas on power and social justice. Then I list some methods this seems to license and mention some recent work that appears consistent with this conception of discovery.

Applied linguistics began to flourish well before any hermeneutic, critical, or postmodern epistemology had become influential in the human sciences. Although sociolinguistics has had a slightly shorter history, most of its conceptual boundaries were set in place before the "interpretative alternative" began to intrude on the more positivist past. Indeed, sociolinguistics blossomed well before its emancipatory potential was well recognized, prompting the editors of one authoritative handbook to make the following claim: "The original euphoria about the possibilities of sociolinguistics has largely subsided; inflated hopes have become more realistic—in some cases, unjustifiably and overhastily abandoned altogether" (Ammon, Dittmar, and Mattheier 1987, x-xi). The same editors also remarked on the great hopes people in education have placed in sociolinguistics, only to have them dashed. Gradually, sociolinguistics filled up the narrow space allotted to it within the shifting disciplinary boundaries of the human sciences.

To many of those most influenced by disciplinary politics, it became no more and no less than a mirror image of the sociology of language, albeit one that overlaps constantly.
with the latter. Both these disciplines examine the relationship between language and society, but sociolinguistics was more often seen as reapplying its findings to language questions and to linguistics, while the sociology of language was seen as reapplying its findings to cultural questions, to society, and to education; but these differences can easily be exaggerated. And because I resist labels applied to my own work, I am not much troubled by any uncertainty that exists here.

For me, the whole of the human sciences is a sprawling system of language games, overlapping and loosely connected in some places, but disconnected nowhere, so I agree with Quine's view: We need to stress this notion of a single, sprawling system and give less attention to disciplinary boundaries that are, as Quine says, "only useful for deans and librarians" (1966, 56). Even the term "sociology of language" is becoming a little dated now, because people "inside" this area are extending their interests not just to language, but to all the sign systems that make up discursive practices.

In my view, a thoroughgoing sociology of language would focus on things concerned with the dominant narratives through which the distribution of power, wealth, position, and privilege are accounted for and justified. As well as discourse studies, broadly conceived, this means things like language loyalty, language as a source and symbol of group solidarity and identity, and language as a tool of social stratification and discrimination. More specifically, my focus is on the social, political, and educational aspects of the relationship between discourse and society. And if sociolinguistics is also concerned with all these things—as it now seems to increasingly be—then I'm a sociolinguist too. Indeed, many applied linguists and sociolinguists are deeply involved in issues of human emancipation, yet these interests are still rather muted in the literature, and they have had relatively little abiding impact on the two disciplines more generally. This is especially true of applied linguistics, with its concentration on language teaching. As one authority observed, "the training and development of language teaching experts has been very insensitive to economic, social, and political implications of what happens" (Christopher Brumfit, in Phillipson 1992, 254). It seems that those applied linguists involved in the delivery of second language programs to culturally different peoples too rarely consult the interests, needs, and values of the program recipients in a critically real way; and this is a cause of cautious concern—at least, for some:

Where I think things have not been really effective has been in the mediation, the way in which these ideas have been integrated into local, social, political and educational conditions. . . . I don't think we have brought into the operation an awareness of local conditions nor an effective involvement of local people . . . so that one can see these [practices] as in some sense, even though enlightened and benevolent, well-meaning, but nevertheless to some degree impositional. (Henry Widdowson, in Phillipson 1992, 254)

Perhaps it is just this perception that "language teaching" is the central interest of applied linguistics that distorts its function and diminishes its real potential. Perhaps this same perception links applied linguistics too closely with the concerns of mainstream linguistics, and not enough with the concerns of the other human sciences.

A Constraining Theory of Knowledge

Robert Phillipson notes that it was linguistics, to the exclusion of the social science disciplines, that dominated theory-building in the first phase of
applied linguistics expansion, and that this was even at the expense of education itself. He sees two incompatible theories of knowledge that now underpin work in applied linguistics:

In one, applied linguistics takes over theories and methods from other areas of scientific study, which then have the status of feeder disciplines; in the other it is an autonomous scientific activity requiring the elaboration of its own theoretical base in relation to its intended applications. When all these ambiguities in the term exist, it is not surprising that there is uncertainty about what ‘applied linguistics’ stands for. (1992, 176)

Now these two theories of knowledge hardly exhaust the range of epistemologies available to applied linguists, and also to sociolinguists. These two different points of entry do suggest, however, a sharp ideological cleavage among adherents of the two disciplines.

Clearly, on logical grounds, the first of these theories of knowledge is much more relevant and appropriate to the study of language teaching, and to the study of language in society too, of course, because both disciplines draw on topics and issues treated very seriously in psychology, political science, sociology, anthropology, and especially in education itself. Yet for many applied linguists, and for many sociolinguists, too, it is the second epistemology that governs their work. For much of the time, work goes on independent of the other disciplinary influences. At best, most references to those influences involve the facile borrowing of technical signs, like “ideology” and “structure,” without much borrowing of the theoretical baggage that gives those signs their precise rules of use. And this epistemological uncertainty creates tensions for many trained in the one approach to their work but very aware of the logic of the other.

In the first place, researchers can see the narrow scope of their actual activities when set alongside “the things that really exist” in the world: the social “things” whose existence is paramount for everyone in the social world—namely, the discursive products of human interaction. Obviously, applied linguists and sociolinguists go well beyond the ideal concerns of linguistics itself. They step resolutely into the ontological minefield that is the real world of human social interaction. Beyond theories of knowledge and theories of meaning, they reach into questions of “being” itself. And a theory of being concerning the social world (an ontology) asks “what things really exist in that world?” and “how basic are they?” By answering these questions, we become clearer about where a discipline intersects with the real world of social interaction. For critical realists, that point is where a human science discipline meets the reasons and accounts that people offer as their own interpretations of the world.

In line with other forms of “scientific realism,” Roy Bhaskar’s realism asserts that people’s reasons and accounts are “real” in the sense that their existence and activity as objects of inquiry are absolutely or relatively independent of the inquiry of which they are the objects. Consequently, they are emergent phenomena that require realist explanations; once we have those explanations, they carry emancipatory implications. In other words, the most basic evidence available for understanding the social world is people’s reasons and accounts that reveal what is in people’s minds about that world: the things in their world that oppress them or the things that they value. These discourses help us interpret the social world and help us explain the many social things that position people. They are always our “prima facie” evidence. And these points are relevant to my theme in two main ways.
EMBRACING OTHER THEORIES AND DISCIPLINES

By consulting the reasons and accounts of relevant actors in other theories and disciplines, researchers learn about the values, beliefs, interests, ideologies, and structures that give rules of use to key signs within those language games, and which position their users in certain ways. As Foucault argues, by locating integrated frameworks we discover “a field of possible options”—a changing space of interweaving discourses from which certain possibilities for emancipatory action can emerge. We really need to search out these spaces between disciplines and theories and reduce our emphasis on the tightly constrained questions and themes that emerge from singular language games and which tend to obscure or ignore the spaces in between. In practice, this means much more than interdisciplinary collaboration. It means expanding the language games of what we do by inviting others with a very different worldview: people from other cultures and social positions who can help linguists examine biases, like their commitments to monodisciplinary dogmas and constraining conceptions of their work.

These dogmas also include over-rigid views about what counts as academic standards, especially the kind of standards that produce a flow of new entrants to the field who are almost always “people like us.” The result of all this would be programs of work better adapted to the postmodern condition, as it plays itself out in increasingly diverse global settings. I believe the future for research in language diversity generally lies in interdisciplinary approaches to “discourse studies,” broadly conceived, politically aware, and socially situated; and much less in 1970s conceptions of discovery largely tied to natural language studied in “defined” contexts.

CONSULTING THE PARTICIPANTS IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

A second priority in this critically real process of research is to seek out the views and interests of those whose social arrangements provide the focus of a given study. This means consulting the range of participants in that community of practice about the aims and scope of the research. Deciding the membership of that community and who their representatives are is a research activity in itself. Once decided, researchers need to know what those people are thinking and take that into account as evidence in reaching conclusions or deciding policy and future practice. But this does not mean going along uncritically with their wishes or preferences. Rather, it means knowing the things they value, the things that oppress them, and having their interests in mind, even if they seem not to know their own best interests. In other words, if justified by the study’s findings, it might be necessary to change what many participants think, but you cannot do this without knowing what they think.

This very process of change becomes part of the policy action that follows the research itself. For example, a study of minority language speakers might discover that the people want only English in their elementary schools. If the evidence says this is contrary to their best interests, it might be necessary to change that preference, perhaps through some form of community education. To make all this work, a researcher needs to be “a local” to some extent. At least, he or she should have the approval, the mentoring, the trust, and the advice of those who represent the local people.

In my work with indigenous peoples, I use ideas borrowed from Graeme Hingangaroa Smith (Corson 2000). He gives four models for doing culturally appropriate research. Each responds to the interests of participants in a community of practice:
1. The Mentor Model: Authoritative people from the community of practice itself guide and mediate the research.

2. The Adoption Model: Researchers are “adopted” by the cultural community and entrusted to do the research with care and responsibility.

3. The Power-Sharing Model: Researchers seek the help of the community and work together towards the research aims.

4. The Empowering Outcomes Model. The research has emancipatory outcomes for the cultural community as its first objective.

These ideas seem relevant to any kind of field research, not just indigenous people. Researchers approaching any cultural group, like the staff of a school, benefit from adopting one of these models.

For a decade, I've been putting these ideas to my students. For example, Benedicta Egbo (1999) followed model 3 in her work with literate and nonliterate rural women in Nigeria; Stephen May (1993) followed model 1 in his study of a multilingual/multicultural school in New Zealand; and Wambui Gathenya (2000) is also following model 1 in her study of street children in Kenya. But model 4 seems the most complete approach. It asks researchers to build the community’s own aims into their work and make those aims their own. Again, when doing all this, a research study in progress needs to consult the reasons and accounts of the participants in order to interpret and understand the different language games that position those people. In language diversity and education research, this means that issues of power are always involved.

**REALIST ETHNOGRAPHIES OF EDUCATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

Again, Foucault’s views on the links between power and discourse seem relevant: Rather than a privilege that an individual possesses, power is a network of relations constantly in tension and ever-present in discursive activity. Power is exercised through the production, accumulation, and functioning of various discourses. Discourse here is the fickle, uncontrollable “object” of human conflict, although no one is outside it completely or sufficiently independent of discourses to manage them effectively. The conflicts that take place over and around discourse, however, can be one-sided if the balance of power consistently favors some groups over others. For Foucault, the development of particular forms of language meets the needs of the powerful but, as often as not, it meets those needs without any direct exercise of influence by the powerful. He also speaks of the “disciplining of discourse”: the way people, teachers for example, who are positioned by complex discourses they themselves have had little hand in shaping, decide who has the right to talk and be listened to in discursive sites and what codes are valued.

Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas also seem very close to critical realism. He tries to produce a genuine sociological framework for his linguistic discussions. Despite its lack of formal linguistic rigor, his marketplace analogy allows him to steer a difficult middle course. For him, individual and group language codes are not isolated from the social and the historical conditions in which they are embedded or from the embodied dispositions that individuals and groups possess. All of these relations go well beyond “what can be said” just in natural language.

Bourdieu’s central point is really an anthropological one: All groups possess esteemed cultural capital, but it is not always the same capital that is valued in education or in other formal sites. By moving from one cultural “field” or setting to another, the relationship between power and significance changes and different types of cultural capital become
more or less valued. A very important point: Schools are one of these cultural fields. Despite their emancipatory purposes, the function of schools is to value certain privileged language games and discourse practices while excluding others.

As Bourdieu acknowledges, different ethnic, gender, and class interests require different and perhaps incompatible types of treatment in research as in policy. For me, as mentioned, an early step in a critically real approach is to discover those interests by consulting those who have them. A later step is to show these interests to be “real” and explain their operation. The final step is to act on those findings through changes to policy or practice that follow from that newly explained evidence. All this means a richer engagement with the reasons and accounts of participants. It means identifying the expected outcomes and latent goals of participants, which is much more than mere interpretation. It asks us to interrogate structural forms of oppression that position people within wider social formations so that real explanation becomes possible.

In response to this shift in the philosophy of social research, language diversity and education research has turned slowly in that direction, too, as surveys suggest (Saville-Troike 1989). The shift is also apparent in the research methods that are now influential (Hornberger and Corson 1997), and consistent with the debate on social research and language ideology more generally (see Silverstein and Urban 1996). Linguistic anthropology is prominent in all this (Duranti 1997). In fact, much of the insightful “sociolinguistics” is now being done by linguistic anthropologists, and this is no accident. The different methodological tools used in participant observation are central here. This includes those methods that had their origins when positivism still held sway and which often need rehabilitation when put to work for more interpretative purposes. For example, positivist methods like structured interviews, observations, or questionnaires, all have weaknesses when used in interpretative research, but each can be improved, in part, by teaming it with other methods.

Many current research methods, however, have emerged from the same post-positivist critique that produced Bhaskar’s theorizing—things like critical discourse analysis, historical critique (genealogies), conversational analysis, ideology critique, critical ethnography, and the critical triangulation of different sets of methods. In some limited way, each of these tries to uncover the reality of the accounts and reasons that suggest the influence of social structures in research theories. When used as multiple approaches in the study of the same phenomenon, they can provide compelling evidence that helps uncover and explain that reality, so they offer some of the deepest possible means for doing emancipatory social research—a form of “depth hermeneutics” that both interprets and explains human phenomena.

Good ethnography of educational communication seems to have the following basic criteria:

1. It involves prolonged and repetitive observation within the actual context.
2. It disturbs the process of interaction as little as possible.
3. Many of its instruments are developed in the field.
4. Many of the important questions emerge as the study proceeds.
5. It consults the reasons and accounts of people in the community under study and addresses their interests.
6. It interprets the full range of sign systems used by humans.
7. It pays close attention to issues of power and discrimination.
8. It tries to identify values, norms, and structures impacting the situation.
9. It tries to understand the sociocultural knowledge participants bring to the context and generate within it,
and the sign systems they use in those processes.

Let me end by briefly presenting some studies from people who are doing much of this already. Each of these four studies contributes to the literature in an area of language diversity and education. The book, *Language Diversity and Education* (Corson 2000), reviews this literature. It is an introductory text for graduate students in the language disciplines and for those in education too.

**NON-STANDARD VARIETIES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY**

Britain's Prince Charles complains that American English is having a "very corrupting" influence on "proper English," which, through the darndest coincidence, happens to be the brand of English he speaks. (McFeatters 1995, A11)

From contacts with the ebonics debate, you will be quite familiar with the prejudices Prince Charles is expressing here. This topic is one of the most intractable social justice issues in education. Monica Heller throws important light on it in her book, which could be used to illustrate any of the four areas I discuss here. However, I am using her work just to illustrate this topic of "language valuation."

She presents the story of one francophone Toronto school in the early 1990s. Her team of researchers tried to uncover the social interests at play in that school, interests that for some students are prejudiced by the different levels of valuation allotted to different language varieties. The half-million Franco-Ontarians are beset by problems of language quality. They are positioned by daily contacts with English—the dominant world language and the language of power in the province—but also by disagreements about the social significance of different varieties of French.

Heller's team studied classrooms and school events, both formal and informal, over a four-year period. They also interviewed administrators, school board officials, trustees, teachers, and students from many ethnolinguistic backgrounds. They also did policy analysis and used videotaped recordings of student council meetings and social functions. The short extract of classroom talk below only illustrates one of their findings. I should mention that a major thing that makes vernacular Franco-Ontarian varieties different from metropolitan French and even from Quebec French, is their wide use of anglicisms. Anglicisms, unfortunately, can cause speakers of standard French to experience high levels of linguistic apoplexy. Here a teacher is working with a grade 10 advanced French class:

Martine: pourquoi lit-on? [why do we read?]

Student: pour relaxer [to relax]

Martine: pour se détendre, 'relaxer' c'est anglais [to 'se détendre' (relax), 'relaxer' is English]

Without dwelling too much on this, the extract illustrates an anachronism in the school's policies and practices, for this is a highly progressive school. It has well functioning antiracist policies, and non-sexist practices. Yet in its classrooms, its teachers discriminate against the language variety of the very population whose children make up the majority of its students.

There is more to say to support this claim of course, but I am just trying to give you the idea. Heller's team give clear answers to questions about the source of dominant discourses, their circulation, and their effects. They provide a close reading of the range of sites where this school's public discourse is constructed and where students are positioned in different ways by the school's constraining definitions of language quality.
I heard crying in the infants’ school as though a child had fallen and the voice came nearer and fell flat upon the air as a small girl came through the door and walked a couple of steps towards us. . . . About her neck a piece of new cord, and from the cord, a board that hung to her shins and cut her as she walked. . . . And the board dragged her down, for she was small, and the cord rasped the flesh on her neck, and there were marks upon her shins where the edge of the board had cut. . . . Chalked on the board, in the fist of Mr. Elijah Jonas-Sessions, “I must not speak Welsh in school.” (Llewellyn 1968, p. 267)

The revival of Welsh is now a success story in Europe. But in North America we are less successful with minority languages. Despite the US Bilingual Education Act’s apparent aims, in practice the response of most schools has been to treat language minority students in a deficit way with respect to English. Because these students are perceived as lacking English, the typical policy response is to give them extra teaching in English with a rapid transition to a use of English across the curriculum. There are exceptions, and Oyster Bilingual School in Washington, D.C. is one of them.

Using discourse analyses, Rebecca Freeman (1996) shows how the interactions between educators and students there combine to resist the oppressive discourses that trouble minority language users in the U.S. At Oyster school, linguistic and cultural diversity are valued as a resource to be developed by all students, and not as a problem for minority students to overcome. This “language-as-resource” orientation resists the “language-as-problem” orientation that is more dominant in North America. Freeman, however, tried to identify the real principles underlying this language policy and how they compared with its actual implementation. To do so, she engaged all levels of authority in the school and the power relations among those levels. Over two years, she interpreted the political interests of policy makers and also the goals of the policy for the students. Then, by triangulating these studies with policy analysis, and with observations of actual practices in classrooms, she untangled some of the ways in which the sociopolitical concerns of the school’s leaders distorted the implementation of its language policy. After comparing the ideal policy with actual practices, she concluded that the interaction between the school’s discourses and societal discourses led to discrepancies between policy and actual practice. In other words, despite the school’s good intentions, the wider discourses often got in the way.

She was always stoppin’ me, sayin’ “that’s not important enough”; and I hadn’t hardly started talking! (quoted in Michaels 1981, 439)

Teachers can so easily overlook differences in student discourse norms. Because of this, they often see culturally different children as unresponsive or disruptive, or they wrongly label children as slow learners because they have different norms for answering and asking questions or for putting their stories into words, like the African American girl quoted above.

Alice Eriks-Brophy and Martha Crago (1994) looked at six infant classrooms in Northern Quebec. All the students were Inuit, as were their teachers. The study looked at initiation-response evaluations and turn allocations. With the help of Inuit consultants, they explored differences between the Inuit and mainstream interactions found elsewhere, so their
study contrasts with other studies, like the ones with Polynesian children in Hawai‘i, which looked at interactions that seemed problematic and needed “fixing.” But these Inuit studies looked at interactions that were working well for all concerned. The researchers shared their findings with European teachers of Inuit, for whom miscommunication is common. As an example, the Inuit teachers usually promoted longer talk sequences with much more child participation. They rarely evaluated student responses, unless some serious error was made; and even here, they used indirect or subtle forms of evaluation as shown below:

(Teacher shows a picture card)

Students: Ammaukaluk [a type of insect]
Teacher: Ammaukaluk. Where does it live?
Students: Inside the stomach.
Others: In the intestines.
Teacher: In the intestines.
(Teacher shows the next card)

Students: Qaurulliq [a black beetle with a white forehead]
Teacher: Qaurulliq. Why is it called qaurulliq?
Student 1: Because it has a forehead.
Student 2: His forehead is white.
Teacher: His forehead has white on it. It's qaurulliq.

Here the student responses were signalled as “correct” by simply moving the talk along, or by repeating the correct answer. There is none of the fulsome praise or censure that Inuit children find threatening in regular classrooms.

This research seems critically real to me because it consults representatives of the community to examine the ways aboriginal teachers transform classroom interactions, so as to incorporate their own culture’s values and discourse norms into those spaces.

A STUDY OF GENDERED DISCOURSE NORMS

The skit is based loosely on a format known from television contests. The student council president, Marcel, acts as master of ceremonies. He announces that the school will now pick the school “stud.” Four boys from the senior grades are called up to sit in a row on the stage. Marcel passes from one boy to the next, asking each one a question. . . . To the third, Ali, he poses the following question: “What is the role of women in society?” Ali is visibly uneasy, and fails to answer. Luc says that he will answer the question, and eventually Marcel gives him the microphone. Luc answers: “To serve and please men.” The audience responds loudly, with many boys cheering and some girls booing. (Heller 1999, 193)

Senior schools are places where archaic male values get reproduced by successive intakes of students. Meanwhile, girls and boys looking for fair treatment in these institutions often differ markedly in their discourse norms, and these differences are known to impact educational success.

Bourdieu’s idea of “symbolic capital” is the starting point for Penny Eckert’s study of “cooperative competition” in adolescent “girl talk.” This special form of cultural capital is important for girls. Their school influence often depends on the painstaking accumulation of this form of moral authority. A community of students scatters symbolic capital on its members by awarding different levels of popularity to different people. And being popular is an essential part of moral authority in high schools. It is highly valued by girls because they have fewer avenues of influence open to them.

“Girl talk” is a typically female speech event that involves long and detailed discussions about other people, norms, and beliefs. In girl talk, they
acquire their own gendered norms and measure their symbolic capital against those norms. In this case, the girls’ efforts to win popularity leaves them with a dilemma: Popularity needs not just likability, but also a visibility that draws the community’s attention to that likability. Just becoming visible, however, means engaging in discreet acts of competition. It also means mixing with prestigious people. And either of these activities can easily compromise a girl’s likability and so her popularity.

Using a form of participatory discourse analysis, Eckert examines a two-hour stretch of group talk where the young women build a community for themselves. They define their own norms through careful processes of negotiation that always seem to end in consensus, even though the processes are quite competitive in their aims.

When taken together, Eckert’s rich collection of episodes—and her wider ethnography in the same school—reveals the importance of shared norms for a community engaging in girl talk. She shows how the negotiation of those norms reaffirms the group’s sense of solidarity and female power itself.

CONCLUSION

In these four studies, the researchers interpret the reasons and accounts of people positioned by different language games, all played out within schools. To explain the structural influences at work, they integrate other theories and other disciplinary language games. Their findings offer critical insights into the world of language diversity and education. In contrast, many of the approaches to language study that evolved in the Western academic world over the last century seem rather divorced from the reasons and accounts of peoples living outside that narrow world and even from many living within it. Seeing natural language as the exclusive social semiotic that shapes discourse and positions people as individuals and groups leaves us with a rather impoverished conception of context.

The contextual signs that constrain and liberate human action depend on rules of use that reach well beyond natural language. All these different sign systems are bound up with questions of cultural dominance, and the language games they structure are affected by historic power differentials maintained largely in the nonlinguistic discourses of wider social formations. It is these that provide the real social context and the real subject matter for language diversity studies in education. I believe we are still much too preoccupied with studying only the surface features of discourse.

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