# Viewpoints

## "Globalisation" and Applied Linguistics: post-imperial questions of identity and the construction of applied linguistics discourse

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"Where are you from?" It's a question we've all been asked at some point, in some place, in some language. It's probably a question we've all put to someone else. When we ask it of others we attribute it to curiosity. When it is put to us, we attribute it to difference, since when posed by strangers, as it most often is, it is as a general rule based either on how we sound or how we look. And yet both our interrogator and we ourselves understand at some level that the question is meaningless, even impertinent. It is rooted in a mythical sense of *space and place*. Lurking just below the surface is an unasked, ultimately unanswerable question: "Where do you *belong*?"

Like every other notion, that of *belonging* is not some natural idea with which all of us come into the world but one constructed socially, and therefore ultimately historically. It is rooted in a particular social order, one that seeks to assign persons to definite geographical and social spaces. When we invoke this notion of *space and place* – the attempt to assign, as if by natural dispensation, persons to particular ethnic, national or other origins or identities – we draw, consciously or unconsciously, on received notions inherited from the past. Linguistics has long established that any child born into this world can learn any language natively. Modern society provides the daily proof that linguistics is not wrong.

Call it the "post-imperial question". For increasing millions, it is one asked wherever they go – in one place because of how they look, in another because of how they sound; perceived as a "foreigner" – a person who for one reason or another no longer does or never did *belong* – in every land, including that of their birth and that of their residence, if the two are indeed not the same. And for no other reason than that they do not fit received notions of *space and place*.

It is *post-imperial* because it best reflects the worldview of imperialism. That, more than any stage of human society, constructed the world around notions of space and place. Nations could not politically and economically

control other nations without the principle that no one *should* ever leave theirs, except as a temporary state, as travelers destined to return to their point of origin. England could only colonise India, Holland Indonesia, or Belgium Congo by virtue of the assumption that the English belonged in England, the Indian in India, and so forth. The colonizers might travel to the colony to rule – might even remain there throughout their lifetime – but they was still conceptualized as English, Dutch or Belgian, even if s/he had never set foot on European soil. The colonized might sojourn in the metropolitan nation to be educated, but they retained their colonial identity. Immigrants from Europe might naturalize and assimilate in another European country without disturbing the basis on which imperialism was constructed – *national* (and thereby *ethnic*) *privilege* – but persons from the colonies could not be allowed that option.

"Globalisation" has given the option to them. It might appear strange to see *globalisation* set in opposition to *imperialism*, since these days it is far more often constructed as its latest phase. If so, it has the peculiar quality of being a phase of imperialism that is undoing the latter's essence. For while imperialism was constructed on the basis of *national privilege*, globalisation is built on *trans*national migration of people and products. Indeed, the very processes that have made globalisation so suspect to so many (large-scale legal and "illegal" immigration from former colonies to the West, and industrial flight and outsourcing from the wealthy nations to the former colonies) are processes that were unthinkable in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are also representative of a phenomenon that imperialism is supposed to preclude: non-Western agency. Indeed, to return to the linguistic domain, the central processes shaping the sociolinguistic profiles of language users throughout the world are the grassroots, not "hegemonic", processes of migration (transnational, and rural to urban) with their concomitant destabilization of the very meaning of our received notions of identity – ethnicity and nationality.

And yet quite the reverse appears to be the case. According to much of the literature that invokes the term globalisation, this works from assumptions of Western imperialist agency resulting in language endangerment, cultural and linguistic imperialism and the deprivation of language rights. Globalisation, we are told, involves processes threatening cultural and linguistic vitality, perhaps even biodiversity in general. In this neat and simple narrative, the mass migrations of persons, the destabilizing of received categories of identity, and the remaking of the sociolinguistic world map receive scant notice. Their implications are considered even less.

Instead, as products of the process of globalisation, they are met with reflexive condemnation, facilely dismissed as the threatening byproducts of a world in a process of disintegration via integration. Through the invocation of this fearsome category, it is never even considered necessary to adduce data, empirically verify or objectively consider such phenomena. It is enough to say that they are byproducts of globalisation for critical perspective

to vanish, replaced by a political vocabulary of hegemony, imperialism, dominance, and indigeneity.

The disappearance of so-called "indigenous" languages in Africa provides a case in point. In the extensive literature on language endangerment, this process is held up as convincing proof of the pernicious effects of the global spread of English and other European languages on the world's linguistic diversity (cf. Nettle and Romaine 2000). And yet no one has been able to turn up any evidence of the proportionate increase of monolingual English- or French-speaking Africans. On the contrary, empirical evidence all points to the inescapable conclusion that those Africans lost to one "indigenous" language are gained by another – that not European but African languages are displacing other African languages (Mazrui 2004; Mufwene 2002). The evidence also shows that these processes have nothing to do with cultural imperialism but are rooted in processes of rural–urban migration and are grassroots rather than statist in impetus. Yet they are remaking the linguistic map of Africa faster than colonialism could ever have conceived, hidden behind language policies that claim to protect "indigenous" languages from "dominant" languages that do not threaten them while leaving them prey to the "indigenous" languages that do. And yet this ground-breaking work investigating real-world processes of "globalisation" remains eclipsed by demonstrably false assumptions that have been elevated to the status of truths by repetition rather than empirical substantiation.

And so a wide divide is steadily opening between the world of sociolinguistic processes and their representation in applied linguistics – one that will eventually require major paradigmatic realignment to bring the two back into correspondence. In the meantime, many in the field will go on asking both people and languages, as it were, "Where are you from?" as a substitute for more meaningful lines of investigation.

## References

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# Dynamic Systems Theory and Applied Linguistics: the ultimate "so what"?

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In recent years there has been quite some debate about the definition of what constitutes Applied Linguistics. In their recent editorial, the editors of InJAL refer to this debate when they state with apparent dismay that "Applied Linguistics is . . . indeterminate in its definition, but unlike other areas of linguistic enquiry, it sometimes seems to be all peripheral overlap without central focus". This is exactly why we would not want to do anything but Applied Linguistics. The fact that AL as a field is not narrowly focussed and constrained has allowed us to explore methods and theories that may have something to say about what language is and how it functions. In our view, insights from neurolinguistics, social constructivism, cognitive linguistics, connectionism, social network theory, political science and many other fields have enriched our understanding of language in use. However, none of these approaches have been able to fully acknowledge the dynamic nature of language systems in the multilingual mind.

In other fields, like physics, biology and also psychology, dynamism has been conveniently captured in terms of Dynamic Systems Theory (DST). In line with the centrifugal tendencies in our interpretation of what AL is, we have made an attempt to come to an understanding of Applied Linguistics in terms of DST. We present DST in brief:

- DST is the science of the development of complex systems over time. Complex systems are sets of interacting variables. A striking example of a simple complex system is the double pendulum: while it has only two variables or degrees of freedom, the trajectory of the swing is very complex. (See http://www.maths.tcd.ie/~plynch/SwingingSpring/doublependulum.html for an illuminating illustration.)
- In many complex systems, the outcome of development over time cannot be predicted, not because we lack the right tools to measure it, but because variables that interact keep changing over time.
- Dynamic systems are always part of another system, going from sub-molecular particles to the universe.
- As they develop over time, dynamic sub-systems appear to settle in specific states, which are preferred but unpredictable, so-called 'attractor states'. States that are never preferred and settled in and are so-called 'repeller states'.
- Systems develop through iterations of simple procedures that are applied over and over again, with the output of the preceding iteration as the input of the next.

- Complexity emerges out of the iterative application of simple procedures; therefore, it is not necessary to postulate innate knowledge.
- The development of a dynamic system appears to be highly dependent on its beginning state. Minor differences at the beginning can have dramatic consequences in the long run. This is called 'the butterfly effect', a term proposed by the meteorologist Lorentz to account for the huge impact small local effects may have on global weather.
- In dynamic systems, changes in one variable have an impact on all other variables that are part of the system: systems are fully interconnected.
- In natural systems, development is dependent on resources: while the frictionless double pendulum presented earlier will make its tracks till eternity, all natural systems will tend to entropy when no additional energy is added to the system.
- Systems develop through interaction with their environment and through internal self-reorganisation.
- Because systems are constantly in flow, they will show variation, which makes them sensitive to specific input at a given point in time and some other input at another point in time.

We contend that any language system (in a speech community at a given time or across time, in a monolingual or bilingual speaker, in an L2 learner, and so on) is by definition a dynamic system in that it meets the defining principles of a dynamic system. All this may sound far-fetched from an AL perspective, but a small (and growing) number of researchers have applied these principles to language and language acquisition with remarkable success (van Geert 1994, 1998; Larsen Freeman 1997; Herdina and Jessner 2002; de Bot, Lowie and Verspoor 2005).

The goal of a DST approach to language is to describe and ultimately explain how language as a complex system emerges and develops over time, both as a social instrument in groups and as a private tool in individuals. The fact that each dynamic system is part of another one means that the cognitive system in an individual is a subsystem in that individual, and is accordingly embodied. It is part of the interaction with the present environment and is situated accordingly. Even though a DST approach sounds like (and basically is) an ultimately mechanistic metaphor for language and language use, it is able to make clear the link between the social and the psychological aspects of the individual and language through the interconnectedness of systems. It can explicate why language development includes both growth and decline, because resources needed to keep the system going are limited and have to be shared. It can explain why multilingual and monolingual language systems are fundamentally different systems. It can also account for stages of development and fossilization in SLA. To do so, a DST approach to language calls for complementary emergentist theories, such as socio-cultural theory, cognitive linguistics, and connectionism.

Have we found the ultimate theory by replacing core issues in AL with sets of complex mathematical DST equations? Have we simply been blinded by the power of the DST approach in the hard sciences and fallen into a new trap of the worst type of positivism? Or have we found a framework that may in the end allow us to come up with a valid approach to relevant aspects of language development, including language teaching? Maybe we have, but the satisfaction of having brought to light all relevant factors and of attaining a full mathematically sound system to describe language as a dynamic system may have to be left to future generations of applied linguists. Meanwhile, we will content ourselves with the exciting first steps in a new direction.

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