

Reflections on Critical Applied Linguistics and Decoloniality: a follow-up conversation with Alastair Pennycook

Reflexões sobre Linguística Aplicada Crítica e Decolonialidade: esticando a conversa com Alastair Pennycook

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Interviewed:

Alastair Pennycook (AP) is Professor Emeritus at the University of Technology Sydney and Research Professor at the MultiLing Centre at the University of Oslo. He is best known for books such as *The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language* (now a Routledge Linguistics Classic), *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, and *Posthumanist Applied Linguistics* (all winners of the the BAAL Book Prize). His most recent book (with Sinfree Makoni) is *Innovations and Challenges in Applied Linguistics from the Global South*. A second edition of *Critical Applied Linguistics, a Critical Reintroduction* was published in 2021.

Interviewers

Viviane Pires Viana Silvestre (VS) is a professor at the *Universidade Estadual de Goiás*, working with language teacher education at undergraduate and graduate levels. Her research interests are related to the area of critical language teacher education and decoloniality.

Rosane Rocha Pessoa (RP) is Professor Emeritus of English at the *Faculdade de Letras* (College of Letters) at the *Universidade Federal de Goiás*, Brazil. She is currently a voluntary professor at the same university, teaching courses in the areas of language and education in the graduate program and supervising undergraduate, master and doctoral students. Her research interests are language education and language teacher education based on critical, decolonial, and posthumanist praxiologies.

In 2015, we had the pleasure to interview professor Alastair Pennycook, in Brasília. At that time, we talked about the book “Critical applied linguistics: a critical introduction”, which was about to complete 15 years of publication (Pennycook, Pessoa, & Silvestre, 2016). As the book was re-edited (Pennycook, 2021), bringing - among many other issues - decolonial thinking into the discussion, we’ve invited professor Alastair Pennycook to have a follow-up conversation about critical applied linguistics and decoloniality. Since 2014, our research group, geoeistemically located in the Midwest of Brazil, has been facing the decolonial challenge (Borelli, 2018) as a way to try to unveil and confront colonialities in our praxes in language (teacher) education. In keeping with Walsh (2009, p. 25), we’ve been trying to review our epistemic locus - “a place of life - that refuses abstract universality”.

VS and RP: Considering that “decolonial thinking is not a method to be applied, but a way of being and thinking about the world” (Mignolo, 2014, p. 62), how have you experienced decoloniality in your life?

AP: It is interesting how the decolonial movement has struck such a chord across different contexts. It is happening in all sorts of ways in all sorts of places, from academics trying to unravel the colonial assumptions of their disciplines to people hauling down statues, from artworks that illustrate the brutality of colonialism to movements by Indigenous people to reclaim land and water. This broad take up, however, brings at least two problems. On the one hand there are numerous backlashes – objections to the critiques of the foundations of western disciplinary knowledge, as well as concern about the constant return to colonial themes. While this first objection may appear just a reactionary rearguard action of universalism under threat, the second brings with it the consideration that to link everything to coloniality – even when this is understood in broader terms than colonialism – may draw attention to the point that southern epistemologies have also existed outside forms of coloniality. While

the decolonial insurgency focuses on much more than a mere anti-colonial stance – it is concerned with the re-emergence of other forms of knowledge – it may also be blind to cultures and knowledges that have always been outside these ways of knowing.

On the other hand, we also need to consider carefully what is being promoted as part of the decolonial alternative. At this particular moment (September 2022) we are witnessing a major uprising by Iranian women to oppose the patriarchal control of the clerical establishment. And yet, this regime itself can be seen in decolonial terms: the Iranian or Islamic Revolution in 1979 was a major uprising against a corrupt and brutal US-backed government. Supported, we might recall, by critical academics in the West, such as Foucault, it was a movement against the incursion of Western knowledge, language, politics and religion. It may not have used the terminology of decoloniality but it was in many respects a decolonial movement and has continued in the vein of a decolonization program to support many aspects of social, cultural and political control (of particular significance for women) that do not sit comfortably with other ideals of a preferred freedom from coloniality. We need therefore to scrutinize with some care what is being done in the name of decoloniality.

I have been intrigued, reflecting on some of my earlier work, that it was already engaging in decoloniality (using more of a postcolonial framework). One of the questions that came up about my 1998 book – *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* – was that one focus of that work was on discourses about China and Chinese learners. Why, people asked, did I focus on China, when it was never colonized? Part of the answer was simply that I wrote that book while living and working in Hong Kong, and my interest was in the ways in which people were positioned in colonial societies. Having worked and lived in China for several years, I had become deeply troubled by the ways in which Chinese students were treated and described by Western teachers. This was of course very open and obvious in the colonial context of Hong Kong, but it was also very evident in China. One of the important themes that emerged in that study was the ways in which discourses about, for example, Chinese language as “monosyllabic and uninflectional...incapable of variation” and thus incapable of creative literature or thought were constantly repeated in encyclopedias, textbooks on China, educational materials and so on (Pennycook, 1998, pp168-171). What I was getting at, without quite having the language of coloniality to do so, was the way in which discourses about colonial others circulated through the colonial matrix. It did not matter that China had not been colonized; it was still subject to colonial discourse. That book – rather clumsily, and arguably with too great an emphasis on discourse – was trying to get at the same issues of decoloniality – how do we dismantle colonial forms of knowledge?

Since then, of course, there has been lots of work trying to get at ways of decolonizing linguistics. The “lingering inheritance of coloniality and its unequal distribution of knowledges, bodies, and languages” persists. Applied Linguistics needs to take this seriously in order to “avoid, albeit unwittingly, continuing the legacy of coloniality.” (de Souza, 2017, p. 206). It has become clear that the most significant aspect of this is not just to take up issues of ‘social justice’ (for all its well-meaning appeal to equality, social justice has limited means for addressing the conditions of inequality that need to be overcome) or to focus on multilingualism rather than monolingualism as the norm (again, useful enough, but it falls short of challenging the need to deal with epistemological and ontological questions about language). The decolonial imperative in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics requires us

to go much further in our attempts to question the ways we think about language, since “mainstream understandings of multilingualism such as those that underpin multilingual education, mother tongue education, additive bilingual education and multilingual national language policies...exemplify the subtle manifestations of ‘coloniality of language’” (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021, p. 17). This is the ongoing challenge we face.

VS and RP: As one of the most influential scholars in the field of critical applied linguistics, how do you see your role against *epistemological racism*? How to *rethink* what we say and do in critical applied linguistics *through a different lens* without being trapped by the knowledge produced in English, published by renowned publishers of the Global North?

AP: To start with, I want to point to all the work that is being done in the anti-racist struggle by many people better able to do this than myself. I could produce a vast list of work but it is more useful just to point to the emergence of concepts such as *raciolinguistics* (Alim, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017) and all the work this enables. I’ve also found books such as Mills’ *Black rights/white wrongs* really helpful for laying out a careful case in political philosophy explaining why and how the mainstream liberal tradition is blind to race. Mills (2017, p. 116) describes “a debilitating ‘whiteness’ to mainstream political philosophy in terms of the crucial assumptions, the issues typically taken up, and the mapping of what is deemed to be the appropriate and important subject matter,” and goes on to argue for a form of “black radical liberalism” that “seeks to correct the (anti-universalist, anti-egalitarian) distortions in mainstream white liberalism” (Mills, 2017, p. 201). There are of course many other books we could cite on this topic, but all of this rather avoids the question of how I see my role in relation to *epistemological racism* (apart from just reading against it).

One important point is that this is not a battle to be fought only by others, only by people of colour. For a start, like the decolonizing project, this has to be an endeavor of self-examination in several ways. We have to ask ourselves how in our ways of being, our ways of saying and writing, the knowledge we produce and perpetuate, our institutional lives, we perpetuate forms of epistemological racism. At the same time, we need to be cautious not to suggest a totalizing account of epistemological racism – that to publish in English is racist, that all knowledge by White intellectuals, or all knowledge produced in institutions of the Global North, is racist. The point, as Kubota (2019) makes clear, is that we need to focus not only on institutional racism (racial inequalities that are institutionally maintained) as opposed to individual racism, but also at forms of structural racism connected to forms of knowledge. The dominance of Euro-American forms of knowledge over knowledge from the Global South cannot be understood without also seeing this in racial terms.

As Kubota also reminds us, we need to see this both in intersectional terms (race, class, gender and so on need to be understood together) and in terms of individual, institutional and epistemological levels operating together. I was wrestling with this as I wrote a recent paper (Pennycook, 2022a) responding to an earlier paper by Bernard Spolsky where he had expressed his concern that the term *critical* invokes “leftliberal identity politics, social-justice activism or, simply, wokeness” (2022, p. 9) and that he was “uncomfortable with the terminological connection to a radical and dangerous wokeism”

(2022, p. 14). He went on to argue that anti-racist education suffers from a “semiotic narrowing of the term ‘racism’” and that the work of Motha (2014) – a woman of colour looking at the ways that English language teaching, race and empire are intertwined, and making a strong case for anti-racist education – adds “personal colour to the arguments presented by Phillipson (1992)” (2022, p. 11). My response to this paper was confounded by the immensely sad news of Spolsky’s death. Should I continue with my critique of his position after his death? Although I continue to have misgivings about having published my response so soon after, I felt nonetheless this had to be written since it wasn’t an issue of the individual but of pointing to the structures and epistemologies that made all this possible. This was not, as I fear some might see this, a quibble between two old, white, male academics about what critical educational linguistics means, but rather about the kinds of knowledge we draw on and reproduce.

In general, the need to rethink what we say and do in critical applied linguistics in response to epistemological racism is similar to the decolonial challenge discussed above. It’s about questioning the taken-for-given categories we use in everyday and academic lives and holding them up for scrutiny in terms of their relation to connected histories of colonialism and racism. The point is not to toss everything out – all European knowledge and language is racist – since this is unworkable and exclusionary. We have to work through the particular histories of language classifications, concepts of language, modes of translation, classroom practices, language policies, bilingual programs, language revival projects, and so on and ask how they have been informed, with what epistemologies, in whose interests. This is a constant project of rethinking the tools with which we work, reworking the tools with which we think.

VS and RP: We teach in university English teacher education programs in Brazil, which have as their focus teaching the English language and educating English teachers. Even though you haven’t worked in these two areas for quite a long time, we’d like to know how you would conceive a university program of English teacher education that could keep alive “radical hope in this troubled world” (Pennycook, 2021, p. 3).

AP: I’ve always tried to maintain a sense of pedagogical possibility and to argue that even in the context of an imperialist language (if we accept that way of framing things), there are possibilities for change and resistance. One of the things we need to do in English language education is grasp the *entanglements* of English (Pennycook, 2021; 2022b). If we want to understand the role, spread and position of English in the world, and our role as language educators in relation to this, we need ways to think about how English (or any language) is interwoven with social, cultural, material and political relations. The idea of *entanglements of English* aims to address the multiple ways that English is connected to all that surrounds it, from global political and economic forces to local relations of class, culture and education, from the circulation of discourses and ideologies to the contextual dispositions of people, artefacts and place. As I tried to show in contexts such as the Philippines and Bangladesh, to understand the diversity of what English is and what it means in multiple contexts, we need to avoid prior assumptions about globalization and its effects and develop instead critical studies of the local embeddedness of English, different geopolitical and economic backgrounds, colonial histories, reli-

gious orientations, language ecologies, and so on. It is the local contingencies of class, ethnicity, desire and discrimination with which English is entangled that really matter.

One of the real difficulties is coming to grips with the complexities at stake here. In a new book (*English Linguistic Imperialism from Below*) we published recently in our book series (Critical Language and Literacy Studies with Multilingual Matters), Leya Mathew (2022) sheds light on the desperate cycle of hope, desire, disappointment and inequality with which English is involved in southern India. Disenfranchised, lower-caste women want access to English for their children, which they see as a means for social mobility for the next generation. Those who already have such access advise against this, promoting first language education. As we know, promotion of first-language education for those who feel that their upward mobility may depend on English is always a fraught argument, and the poor may spurn education in the first language, instead finding themselves paying for poor quality rote English that may not provide the ticket to change that is hoped for. Thus, the hegemonic role of English in a post-colonial context like India is constantly reproduced, and the agents of this reproduction may be impoverished women as much as wealthier men. English for these mothers becomes, at least in their eyes, a tool for emancipation from class and caste-based segregation and subjugation, and yet, English language education and policies also serve to maintain these inequalities.

As English language educators, we have to grasp these complexities, and understand all these local instantiations of English. This is not about local varieties of English nor about one hegemonic role for English but rather a complexity of entangled relations. It is into these spaces that we teach. To develop a positive agenda here we need to do the same kind of decolonial thinking as outlined above – questioning the epistemologies, frameworks and methodologies promoted by the Global North – and work towards new collectivities in a way akin to Escobar's (2021, p. 2) notion of civilizational transition(s) from the “dominance of a single, allegedly globalized, model of life to the peaceful, though tense, co-existence of a multiplicity of models, a world where many worlds fit, a pluriverse.” These local coalitions are going on in many places: I was struck recently at a gay pride (Gooth Kernow) rally in Truro, a small town in Cornwall, South West England, how other local movements were also present such as Black Voices Cornwall (Levow Du Kernow), working to enable Cornwall to “become an active anti-racist region.” Both included the little-used Cornish language in their slogans. These local struggles go on in small towns on the European periphery as they do in many places across the Global South. It is by recognizing, tapping into and supporting these local actions of the pluriverse that we can also see possibilities for renewal.

The challenge, then, is how to think about disentangling English. This is not to suggest that English can somehow become unentangled – a language separated from all that it is engaged with – but rather that the relations between English and discourses, ideologies, cultures and economies are not inevitable. This is a decolonial project that takes up the challenge to delink English from its ties of coloniality, to challenge the connections between English and visions of modernity, to oppose ways English is assumed to be a pathway to change, development and material success, to confront the relations between English and social, racial and gendered discrimination, to counter the entanglements of English with forms of political economy and embodied desires, and to rethink our assumptions about languages and multilingualism. This implies decolonial activism, research and pedagogy that aim both

to decolonize and provincialize English and to redress the repressive institutionalization of inequality in contemporary life with which it is connected.

VS and RP: Many language teacher education scholars have been trying to fight against language coloniality by, for example, confronting standard language, language boundaries, and monolingualism as well as valuing diverse language repertoires. However, modern ideologies of language seem to have been kept intact in various social and educational spheres. If, as you suggest in your critical re-introduction of critical applied linguistics (2021), social forces of inequality are far greater than our educational praxes, aren't we just banging our head against a brick wall? Do you know of initiatives or examples that prove it wrong? Which ones?

AP: I didn't mean to present an image of hopelessness. I also discussed at some length questions around optimism, pessimism and radical hope. At the same time, it's really important to be realistic about what we're up against and what tools we have at our disposal. Jaspers' (2018) warning about not getting too carried away by the emancipatory potential of translanguaging is important here. His point is that the idea that social change can be brought about by changing the ways languages are used and taught may underestimate the regulatory forces of education, and that there is a potential contradiction in a stance that on the one hand starts with a critical sociology of education that reiterates the social reproduction of schooling (education reproduces rather than changes social inequalities) and on the other presents pedagogical suggestions for social change. So of course it's important to confront standard language ideologies, language boundaries, monolingualism and so on, but we need to understand this in the context of broad social structures and political interests.

The problem is that a strong critical position often appears to present a very bleak vision of the world. This is arguably a problem with current discussions of neoliberalism: they become so totalizing – neoliberalism is everywhere and affects everything – that there seems little way out. There is of course the old 'apart from me' escape clause – racism, neoliberalism, patriarchy are everywhere but fortunately I can see them and rise above – but this kind of patronizing emancipatory discourse has been shown for its inadequacies long ago. The point, rather, is not to opt for some form of optimism, as Pinker (2018) does, by trying to show that things are not actually as bad as they seem, nor to get stuck in a pessimistic position from which nothing can be done. Neither position presents possibilities for change (optimists don't need to; pessimists don't see the point). The idea of radical hope (Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Lear, 2006) presents one way of thinking about this, and echoes the arguments of Gramsci, Freire and other critical thinkers and educators.

Radical hope acknowledges the fundamental injustices that inform many aspects of daily life, yet it also insists that we have to find ways forward, even if the endpoints remain unclear. Neither utopian claims that everything is going well, nor dystopian visions that everything is getting worse can provide the core of a critical applied linguistic project (especially since the *applied* element needs to be able to articulate projects for change). The distinction between critical work, which necessarily assesses inequality in many contemporary aspects of society, and dystopian visions that stoke pessimistic interpretations of the future, can be hard to separate, but it is an important one. Neither should a challenge that we don't have all the answers

hold us back from articulating some form of radical hope for an alternative future. So we need to be able to think in terms of possibilities, transformations, change, alternative futures. Confronting standard language, language boundaries, and monolingualism while also valuing diverse language repertoires is doubtless part of this struggle but we need to also consider that these are not the endpoint or the sole means to bring about change. In some ways they are symptoms of other hegemonies, so we need to appreciate both that the battle is bigger than opposing standard languages and so on, and that this may not always be the right battle to fight. The fact that these ways of doing language continue to dominate in repressive state institutions, however, also suggests not that our struggle is pointless but rather that we need reinforcements.

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