

# Introduction

## ***1.1 LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND CATERPILLARS FROM A BIRD'S EYE VIEW***

This book is about the wager of studying language as a global phenomenon, from a bird's eye view as it were. While the expression "bird's eye view" is typically used in a figurative sense, it is useful to speak about birds in a more literal sense as well. Birds, for one, are accustomed to seeing the world from a vantage point that humans, at least without the assistance of technology, cannot. The way the bird sees the world offers a way to understand how that which is "global" is contingent on its "local" iterations, but also how a "global" view can help us to make sense of that which is encountered "locally." Consider, for a moment, the fact that in flight birds must avoid predators nearly everywhere they go, even as they locate their own prey. This reality becomes even more complicated if a bird considers eating a caterpillar, because they rely on all defense mechanisms that can be imagined, ranging from bristles that release venom, glands that discharge repugnant odors, or various forms of mimesis (blending into its surroundings) and mimicry (looking like another animal). Among the most unusual defense mechanisms is that seen in caterpillars which have evolved to develop "eyespot" on the anterior (front-end) segments of their bodies that mimic the appearance of snakes, which are of course predators to the birds (Janzen, Hallwachs, & Burns, 2010). On top of all this, some species of caterpillar go beyond static resemblances of snakes, inflating their anterior segments to appear more snake-like (Hossie & Sherratt, 2014). Some can even manually palpitate their "eyespot" in a manner that resembles the blinking of a snake (Hossie, Sherratt, Janzen, & Hallwachs, 2013). While a vast majority of snake species actually pose no real threat to humans, with the exception of those that are venomous or large enough to eat a fully grown adult, there appears to be a seemingly universal fear of snakes,

which is of course attributable in large part to Judeo-Christian lore (in the book of Genesis, Satan in the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden), mythology (Medusa in Greek mythology), or fables (the story of the farmer and the viper in Aesop's fables). Birds, on the other hand, are biologically programmed to be fearful of snakes simply because they in fact do pose a legitimate threat to the bird. It must therefore be quite difficult to be a bird; the moment you think you have identified your prey (a caterpillar), it may in fact turn out to be a predator (a snake), and your very survival in that scenario depends on an "irrational fear," which hopefully compels you to not take the risk (Castellano & Cermelli, 2015, p. 2).

The bird's challenge of identifying its prey serves as a useful analogy for the complexities of locating and understanding cultural difference across global space. To continue with the case of the caterpillar as a potential meal for the bird, there are three important considerations related to identifying features of cultural distinctiveness that are worth exploring further. First, it is significant that only one part of the snake, in this case the "eyespot," is what enables the bird to consider or conclude whether the object in question is a snake or not. In this sense, the "eyespot" operate as something of a synecdoche. A synecdoche typically refers to a part that semiotically represents a whole; for instance, an icon of a palm, rather than a depiction of a person holding up their palm, can be a sign for "do not walk." In this case, the part in question (the "eyespot") is that which indexes the possibility of a snake in a manner that distinguishes the semiotic salience of the part. After all, there are other features, such as the color green or an elongated body, which both the snake and caterpillar can share. In short, one small part of a larger whole can differentiate two things that can otherwise be visually difficult to distinguish.

Second, it is significant that the "eyespot" in question appear not on the caterpillar's head itself but adjacently on its anterior segments. What this means is that the masquerade effect can be achieved most optimally if the caterpillar is approached from above. Indeed, the effectiveness of the caterpillar's attempted serpentine mimicry depends on the specific angle from which the prey is approached (Hossie & Sherratt, 2014). There is, in other words, depending on the vantage point from which it is viewed, potential for something of a semiotic-ontological discombobulation in which its predator confuses not only the caterpillar for a snake but also the caterpillar's anterior segments for its head. This serves as an appropriate metaphor for challenging the expectation that the head must assume

## Introduction

3

a dominant or primary position. For our purposes, what this means is that there might be something additional to be learned about the core semiotic features of a given culture by approaching it not only “head-on,” as it were, but from other perspectives: not directly but obliquely as well.

Third, it is significant that, within this scenario of semiotic-ontological instability, there is the possibility that the caterpillar not only can be mistaken for a snake but can indeed *be* a snake. Consider the following four scenarios, which all presume via narrative omniscience that the caterpillar is in fact a caterpillar:

1. The bird believes the caterpillar is a caterpillar and eats it.
2. The bird is not certain whether it is a caterpillar or a snake but takes a chance anyway and eats it.
3. The bird is not certain whether it is a caterpillar or a snake and does not want to take a chance and flies away.
4. The bird believes the caterpillar is a snake and flies away.<sup>1</sup>

In scenario one, there is no uncertainty, for the question of whether the object was indeed a caterpillar is resolved at the moment of consumption. In scenario two, there is momentary uncertainty that is eventually resolved at the moment of consumption. In scenario three, there is sheer uncertainty that will never be resolved (as suggested above, it is actually in the bird’s best interest to leave it at that). Finally, in scenario four, there is – in the mind of the bird – ontological certitude, even if it is false from a purely factual point of view. The bird flies away and therefore the caterpillar might as well have been a snake and as such was – in the mind of the bird – a snake.

The aforementioned quandary allows us to consider what might be achieved by approaching cultural imaginaries as entities that are semiotically iterated across global space. Similar to how the bird faces challenges locating food, we invariably run into issues understanding culture. Indeed, I would like to suggest that the wager of the bird in its encounter with the “caterpillar” is in many ways analogous to the wager of studying culture from a global perspective. This perspective is perhaps akin to the epistemological locus of “Apollo’s eye,” as described by Denis Cosgrove (2003). For Cosgrove, the notion of Apollo’s eye is a means to envision things as “forged in one locale across global space” (p. 265). On the more obvious side, Apollo’s eye serves as a metaphor for the affordances of acknowledging the ways in

<sup>1</sup> These scenarios are inspired by the work of evolutionary biologist Sergio Castellano and mathematician Paolo Cermelli (see Castellano & Cermelli, 2015).

which a given culture might undergo changes in relation to and perhaps in spite of its presumed territorial origins. But in addition, this locus compels us to consider how, when we encounter a global iteration of a particular culture beyond its presumed territorial origins, what kinds of assumptions we had relied on to conceptualize the “original” version of the culture. The perspective of Apollo’s eye derives from Apollonian cosmology in an effort to reconcile the “contingencies of empirical geographical knowledge” (p. 38). To return to the case of the bird and the caterpillar, empirical conclusions, or those that are reached by methodologically experiential means, are subject to a series of epistemological contingencies.

At this point it is useful to focus on the aforementioned scenarios three and four, for they are illustrative of the mechanics of locating cultural discreteness in relation to the global. More specifically, the confusion of the head and the anterior segments is analogous to the semiotic phenomenology of culture in global space. Consider how it is taken for granted that authentic culture (i.e., the head) must always come before its transnational, global iterations (i.e., the anterior segments): for instance, there are spaces such as Koreatowns around the world, but they are naturally assumed to be derivative of an original, authentic Korea. While my interest is not limited to troubling the distinction between the “authentic” and the “derivative” per se, I would like to foreground the ways in which we can revisit the assumptions by which the features that differentiate the authentic from the derivative can be semiotically delineated but also, more broadly, how those core semiotic features of a given culture come to be rendered as salient in global space at a certain point in time. Put differently, is it possible that the very idea of culture, at least in terms of its semiotically distinguishing traits, can be understood best through its respective iterations across global space and time?<sup>2</sup> While what is encountered may not be “authentic” per se, if we are able to trouble the very conditions and premises of originality and to approach the problem instead as a spatial and semiotic consideration, then the presumed transposability between the “authentic” and the “derivative” (i.e., the head and the anterior segments) can itself be approached from a continuously evolving vantage point.

It is from this vantage point that I examine global Korea as a case study with particular attention to various global iterations of Korea in

<sup>2</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 2, there has been an overt emphasis on time in the imagination of nationalist eras and national cultures, and as such this focus on space will necessarily be historically contingent.

*Introduction*

5

relation to the complex entanglements among language, semiotic resources, and spatial elements. Through an examination of publicly visible signage and other artifacts of the built environment, I examine how such representational assemblages point to the possibility of national imaginaries and perhaps other cultural forms as existing not as a priori categories of cultural belonging but instead as entities that can be relocated and reinvented across global space. My sites in Korea include, for instance, tourist destinations such as the Gyeongbokgung Palace, where visitors flock to experience an “authentic” Korean spectacle; museums such as the Independence Hall of Korea, where Korean secondary school students are taken on field trips to commemorate Korean independence from Japanese colonial rule in 1945; and the small series of islets in the Pacific Ocean referred to by Koreans as Dokdo, whose ownership has been disputed by Korea and Japan since the conclusion of World War II. I also examine the public space of Koreatowns across Asia (China, Japan, Hong Kong), the Americas (Brazil, Canada, Mexico, the United States), and Europe (the United Kingdom), focusing on how uses and circulations of language and other semiotic resources reinvent varied forms of Koreanness.

By doing so, this book proposes that inquiries in the globalization of language need not limit themselves to those that understand how individuals from “culture A” can communicate with those of “culture B,” even in spite of their respective dominant languages being “language X” and “language Y.” Indeed, in the race to study and theorize how communication can be achieved across and in spite of cultural differences, we lose sight of what constitutes those differences to begin with, and how in some cases the delineations of difference are produced in the very effort to overcome them. Alternatively, this book proposes that, by exploring various moments and sites of translingual encounter, we find ourselves in a position to revisit many of our foundational assumptions about, and therefore arrive at a fuller understanding of, what might constitute culture to begin with. Simply put, this book is not a catalogue of hybridizations of culture and language as they occur in global contexts; instead, it is an inquiry into what such encounters can illuminate about the varied features of cultural distinctiveness that are otherwise difficult to see by approaching culture in its isolated form, but can be seen anew from a global perspective. In this regard, *Locating Translingualism* is not merely about locating spaces where translingualism happens but also about exploring the various ways in which linguistic and cultural difference can be located via translingualism.

## 1.2 TRANSLINGUALISM IN/AS SPACE

The radical and ongoing transformations to language practices in the context of the transcultural flows of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries continue to be a topic of great interest. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in studies on “translingualism” within a wide range of language-oriented academic disciplines. In fact, it could be said that the study of language is undergoing something of a “translingual turn,” affording greater attention to the reality that the very notion of “language” inherently limits our understanding of the diverse possibilities for communicative practice across cultural and linguistic difference worldwide. This “turn” can be seen in the introduction of conceptual frameworks ranging from *transidioma* (Jacquemet, 2005), *translanguaging* (García, 2009; Li Wei, 2018), *polylingual languaging* (Jørgensen, 2008), *polylingualism* (Møller, 2008), *truncated multilingualism* (Blommaert, 2010), *metro-lingualism* (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015b), *translingual practice* (Canagarajah, 2013), *transglossia* (Sultana, Dovchin, & Pennycook, 2015), or *transliteracy* (You, 2016), among many others. Sender Dovchin and I (2019), in the introduction to our volume, *Translinguistics: Negotiating Innovation and Ordinarity*, have described the translingual turn, at least within the disciplinary paradigm of sociolinguistics, as reflective of three realities:

1. Boundaries between “languages” are the result of ideological invention and sedimentation;
2. Such boundaries do not unilaterally guide communication in everyday contexts; and
3. Communication itself is not limited to “language” insofar as interlocutors draw on a range of semiotic and spatial repertoires. (p. 1)

The first two points may be worth recapitulating briefly. The first point is that categories we understand today as “languages,” frequently conceptualized, treated, and studied as “codes,” are relatively recent inventions in human history (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Gramling, 2016). For Sifre Makoni and Alastair Pennycook (2005) dominant epistemologies of “language” today are the legacy of the “ideology of countability that was a cornerstone of European governance and surveillance of the world” (p. 142). On this front, it is important to consider that the very notion of “language” is not based on a universal epistemology of communication, evident especially when considering communities in the Global South, such as in Africa, South

## Introduction

7

Asia, and Southeast Asia, who had always managed linguistically pluralistic interactions irrespective of demarcations according to “codes,” (Canagarajah, 2013; Khubchandani, 1997; Makoni, 1998, 2002), and certainly well before scholars began to devote greater attention to such linguistic plurality (see Sugiharto, 2015). As David Gramling (2016) notes, languages came to be further sedimented as monolingually transposable entities at the service of the translation industry, whether in the realm of global literature or in machine translation programming. Meanwhile, such conceptualizations centered on language-as-code have become sedimented over time and continue to be sustained in various realms of social life where individuals and indeed entire communities face discrimination based on their purported inability to use language proficiently, at least according to dominant norms (Cameron, 2012; Dovchin, 2020; González & Melis, 2000; Lindemann & Moran, 2017; Lippi-Green, 2012; Subtirelu, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

The translingual turn secondly draws attention to the reality that peoples in many communities are able to communicate successfully with little conscious regard to which “languages” they are using. Pennycook and Emi Otsuji (2015b) note that part of the problem stems from dominant frameworks such as “bilingualism” or “multilingualism,” which reduce communication to an “enumerative” logic by which only that which can be literally counted as a language counts (p. 16). Monica Heller (1999) similarly problematizes dominant approaches to linguistic plurality by referring to it as “parallel monolingualism” (p. 5). As Jens Normann Jørgensen (2008) argues:

language users use features more than structures. They know that to some people some of these features belong together in sets which are called specific languages such as Danish and Turkish, but the speakers do not necessarily separate features from these sets in their linguistic behavior. (p. 167)

As Ofelia García (2009) puts it, today speakers of multiple languages do not necessarily view their utterances as falling within discrete “codes” but rather as operating in a cohesive “continuum that is accessed” (p. 47). Indeed, as Dovchin and I (2019) have tried to highlight, for many individuals, such translingual practices are part of everyday

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this is especially pronounced in educational contexts, which could be considered bastions of linguistic discrimination (Dovchin, 2019), premised on the notion of language as code (Eunjeong Lee & Alvarez, 2020; N. Flores & Rosa, 2015; Hinton, 2016; Jenny Lee & Rice, 2007; Matsuda, 2006; Mazak & Carroll, 2017; Paris & Alim, 2017).

communication and there is still a need to minimize the exoticizing tendencies of recent scholarship by foregrounding the “ordinariness” of translinguistics (see also Blommaert, 2019; Bolander & Sultana, 2019; Canagarajah & Dovchin, 2019; Li Wei & Zhu Hua, 2019; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2019).<sup>4</sup>

The third point (which is that communication can rarely be considered as limited to “language” insofar as interlocutors draw on a range of semiotic resources and spatial elements), while arguably the least explored consideration in the translingual turn, may be considered as perhaps the most significant and compelling. Pennycook (2020) has referred to this focus on semiotic and spatial relations of communication, which brings “a range of political, epistemological and ontological questions to the table” as endemic to a “4th wave of sociolinguistics” (p. 223, as opposed to the tail end of a 3rd wave as suggested by Penelope Eckert [2018]). In this sense, it could be said that the theoretical foundations to approaching language beyond language as such can be found in M. A. K. Halliday’s (1978) conceptualization of “language as social semiotic.” A central premise to systemic functional linguistics, “language as social semiotic” represents a shift away from the Chomskyan conceptualization of competence toward a “sociosemiotic” one in which the social structure, including cultural context, is key to understanding the contingency of linguistic systems on social use. As Halliday (1978) noted, situational features (field, tenor, mode) precede semantic components (ideational, interpersonal, textual). While Halliday’s tripartite framework of ideational, interpersonal, and textual structures has been critiqued and revised over the years (see Fairclough, 2003), at the very least it can be seen as a critical precursor to the “practice” turn in sociolinguistics. This turn is analogous to the practice turn in the humanistic social sciences more generally, which understands social activities not as limited to those that merely follow a predetermined script of expected behaviors or rituals but as defining and constituting the purportedly given set of expectations through the act of doing (Butler, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, as I have argued elsewhere, while there has been a considerable surge in scholarly treatment on translingual practice since the 2010s, many works merely appropriate the trans-framework to describe or analyze the simultaneous copresence of multiple languages, without meaningfully troubling extant language boundaries (Jerry Won Lee, 2018; see also Pennycook, 2019). It seems as though languages have been “disinvented,” but the challenge has been “reconstituting” them, to borrow the words of Makoni and Pennycook (2005).



Within the study of language, the practice turn moves us away from a paradigm of linguistics in which grammaticality is a fixed system that is merely used. Emblematic of this approach is the Saussurean tradition of *langue-parole*, in which *langue*, or language, is a closed ecosystem in the minds of a homogeneous speech community based on a series of arbitrary relationships between the signifier and the signified. In this conceptualization of language, *parole*, or spoken speech, can only be successful if premised on what Mary Louise Pratt (1987) has termed the “linguistic utopia” (p. 50), reflecting a shared understanding between interlocutors of the signifier–signified relationship. The notion of fixed grammaticality is evident also in the Chomskyan linguistic tradition of competence–performance, in which there is an implied, idealized form of language, taxonomized according to grammatical structures (which are differentiated and studied under the traditional branches of linguistics: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics), even if in everyday use language is expected to be imperfect. The focus on “language” throughout this book (rather than on linguistics in the conventional sense) is therefore based in part on Pennycook’s (2010a) approach to language as a “local practice,” in which “the notion of language as a system is challenged in favour of a view of language as doing” (p. 2).

My emphasis on “language” in this text is likewise guided by an interest in underscoring a broader understanding of communication beyond the “linguistic” per se. For one, no academic discipline can claim jurisdiction over the term “language” in the way they can over “linguistic.” Therefore, inquiry that prioritizes the conceptual category of “language” is free to pursue a broad inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary approach that benefits from insights from a range of bodies of knowledge without being arbitrarily beholden to a specific disciplinary orientation to language. In addition, this orientation to “language” invites consideration of the wide range of communicative resources at work, many of which generally fall beyond the purview of the study of the “linguistic.” In this regard, to return to the aforementioned “4th wave,” it is productive to note an ongoing effort to emphasize the centrality of space in relation to the translingual turn. This emphasis draws on the long multidisciplinary tradition of approaching space not as an empty void but in terms of its relation to social activity and intervention (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, [1974] 1991). Doreen Massey’s (1995) influential work, for instance, emphasized the importance of viewing “objects in space,” whether physical objects or abstract objects like social identities, “as products of the spatial organization of relations” (p. 317). Meanwhile, Michel de

Certeau's (1984) analogy of "walking in the city" opens the possibility that space does not exist unto itself but comes to be the moment humans make use of it. Illustrative is de Certeau's example of the agentive role of the walker in the production of the city space:

First, if it is true that a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g., by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g., by a wall that prevents one from going farther), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities. In that way, he makes them exist as well. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 98)

In short, the wall cannot in itself prevent the walker from going farther insofar as the walker must first encounter the wall in order to be prevented from going farther in the first place, thus reflecting the codependency of spatial elements and human actors.

Pennycook's (2010a), in his aforementioned conceptualization of language as a "local practice," develops de Certeau's notion of "walking in the city" as a means of spatial production in order to theorize how language specifically, even if somewhat paradoxically, reconstitutes the localities in which it is practiced. For Pennycook, de Certeau's metaphor of walking in the city foregrounds how "movement through the city . . . performatively produces meaning" (p. 63). Even though it might seem to be a minor example, it does offer a useful illustration of how space is an entailment of human action; space, from this perspective, is not merely the background to or context in which language is practiced but instead that which is constituted by language practice itself. It is, put differently, that which results from the interactions between people, in tandem with their communicative dispositions and linguistic and semiotic resources, and objects from the material and built environment.

The emphasis on space in the study of language is particularly evident in various frameworks such as those of translanguaging space (Li Wei, 2011; Li Wei & Zhu Hua, 2013), metrolingualism (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015b), semiotic assemblages (Pennycook, 2017), spatial repertoires (Canagarajah, 2018), and translingual space (Du, Lee, & Sok, 2020). The notion of translanguaging space refers to both "a space for the act of translanguaging as well as a space created through translanguaging" (Li Wei, 2011, p. 1223). As Li Wei further notes, we cannot view such practices of translanguaging in a vacuum but need to attend to the strategic ways in which interlocutors produce spaces that are conducive to translanguaging. Relatedly, Suresh Canagarajah (2018) emphasizes the importance of viewing