1 Why Language Assemblages?

Thinking of language as an assemblage, according to Wee (2021), has a number of advantages over other views of language, particularly those that suggest that language is a system with defined boundaries. Thinking in terms of assemblages can help us understand how languages are constantly under construction, how they are put together through social processes and why it is better to start with an understanding of social action than an assumption about pregiven languages. The idea of assemblages also allows for a flexibility about what languages are, not just in terms of having fuzzy linguistic boundaries (languages blend together) but in terms of what constitutes language more generally. Languages are assembled from different elements, both linguistic elements as traditionally understood (words and grammar, for example) as well as items less commonly included (bodies and things). An assemblage approach to language thus raises questions about what constitutes the linguistic as well as giving us ways of thinking about language as dynamic, constructed, open-ended and in and of the world. This is to approach language not as a pre-existing or circumscribed entity but rather as something created, produced in social action. Language from this point of view is embedded in, indeed part of, diverse social and physical environments, distributed across the material world and part of our embodied existence.

In this book I want to unsettle regular accounts of knowledge about language in several ways and for several reasons. Something of an ontological panic seems to have gripped some areas of linguistics recently. There is nothing new in questions about the ontological status of language and languages. In one of the earliest introductions to applied linguistics, when the field was still heavily reliant on formal linguistic accounts for an understanding of language, Corder (1973, p.27, emphasis added) warned of the dangers of following a ‘linguistic approach to language’ since it is the ‘most objectivizing. But language is not, after all, a thing with real existence.’ This caution was already pointing
to the problem that approaches to language developed within the field of linguistics tended towards the reification of its object. The ontological status of language and languages, and thus the subject matter of linguistics, has always been a topic in need of serious discussion (Santana, 2016), though for obvious reasons linguists have tended to tiptoe around this problem (the discipline defines itself in no small measure around the idea of separate and comparable languages).

Questions about what language is, or what languages are, or how the two are related, are a necessary part of any ontologically curious position (Wee, 2021). Yet such curiosity has been met recently with a rather panicked response, a concern that if the status of languages is questioned, so too are the possibilities of language policy, language maintenance, bilingualism, second language acquisition and much more (MacSwan, 2020, 2022a). All this seems rather alarmist, as well as mistaken: the obvious problems with the status of ‘languages’ as commonly conceived doesn’t mean that language learning practices and policies will somehow cease to occur; it simply challenges the terms with which these are described. Integrational linguists have long raised questions about the status of languages in the field: ‘linguistics does not need to postulate the existence of languages as part of its theoretical apparatus’ (Harris, 1990a, p.45). Questions that have pushed this concern further, however, asking where the boundaries around language should be drawn – whether we can study animal communication with sociolinguistic tools (Cornips, 2022, in press) or what roles artefacts may play in social relations (Kell and Budach, 2024) – have brought warnings of a ‘neo-pagan apocalyptic linguistics’ (Pable, 2022, p.6).

As Sinfree Makoni and I (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007, p.2) pointed out some years ago, languages do not exist as pre-formed entities in the world; they are, by contrast, ‘the inventions of social, cultural and political movements’. This is to acknowledge that languages are social creations, and to warn against the reification of languages that comes from treating them as bounded systems. Like others who have pointed to the obvious problems with the ontological status of languages within linguistics (Otheguy et al., 2018), we also emphasized that languages nonetheless exist as social entities with very real effects, and that once we have raised questions about the status of languages, we need to develop alternative ways of thinking about this focus of our work. We talked about this in terms of ‘a project not only of critique but one of reconstruction’ (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007, p.3), while García and her colleagues have taken this up, arguably...
more productively, in terms of translanguaging. As we shall see in the discussion in Chapter 3, translanguaging itself is also a term that needs to be handled with a degree of caution, but these projects are by no means an abandonment of language, language education or language planning. They do not, as some suggest, undermine minoritized speakers’ possibilities for social justice (Tannenbaum and Shohamy, 2023) so much as shift the grounds on which such campaigns are fought.

The question of whether and how languages exist is an ontological one. The ontological panic that follows ideas such as disinvention, integration or translanguaging is also about whose knowledge counts. As Jakobs and Hünig (2022, p.46) warn, a rejection of the concept of (different) languages is not necessarily a very useful direction for linguistics because it goes against both the disciplinary investment in different languages and everyday concepts of language. This should not mean, however, that it is not worth trying to find better ways of grasping linguistic realities than are currently presented in both domains, or of trying to understand how common concepts of language and linguistic understandings of language are related. There is a tension in linguistic approaches to this question: on the one hand a not unreasonable position that, as academic linguists, we know best; on the other, an egalitarian acknowledgement that other people’s views matter. As discussed in this and the next chapter, how everyday knowledge about language is understood without falling into the descriptive–prescriptive dichotomy or labelling popular views as myths or errors in need of correction is another theme of importance here.

Corder’s (1973) observation about the existence of language was also an applied linguistic concern. It has been common in applied linguistics to see our work as applying existing linguistic knowledge to real-world contexts. This might seem fairly obviously to be what we do – inherent perhaps in the disciplinary terminology we inherited – and this has traditionally been the way that linguistics and applied linguistics have operated, with the one providing theories of language and the other putting them into practice, or at least mediating between the two. Alongside the hierarchical understanding of

1 In places where there are important differences in purpose, I draw distinctions between linguistic and applied linguistic work. In other contexts I treat both as forms of linguistics since they share common foundations. Emphasizing the difference is not always helpful and if we all see ourselves as linguists, we potentially set a better agenda for change than if we insist on deep disciplinary schisms.
knowledge distribution that this view espouses, it also raises the question of what it means to ‘use linguistics’ for applied purposes. For Kramsch (2015, p.455), applied linguistics is not so much ‘the application of linguistic theory or any other theory to the real-life problem of language learning and teaching’ as ‘the practice of language study itself, and the theory that could be drawn from that practice’. That is to say, the work we do in applied linguistics – translation, language in the workplace, language education, language policy and so forth – is itself the study of language, not the application of someone else’s version of language.

Like Kramsch’s (2015) call for a theory of language practice and Li Wei’s (2018) call for a practical theory of language, this book makes central an applied linguistic view of language based in practice. Both views are part of a broader critical orientation that argues that practice and theory should not be separated and certainly not placed in a hierarchical relationship. Also known as praxis, this view suggests that theory derives from practice and that theory therefore needs to be practical: ‘The process of theorization, or knowledge construction, involves a perpetual cycle of practice-theory-practice’ (Li Wei, 2018, p.11). There are a number of reasons why it is important to develop practical theories of language: the knowledge about language drawn from linguistics may not be fit for purpose; if we are trying to deal with real-world contexts, it doesn’t really make sense to draw on theories of language that haven’t emerged from such contexts.

This book therefore sets out to look at what language is and what languages are (noting these may be quite different questions) with a view to arriving not at one practical theory of language, but rather at ways of assembling practical ways of thinking about language or, as I discuss in Chapter 6, understanding applied linguistics as a practical assemblage (Pennycook, 2018c). Rather than thinking about applied linguistics in disciplinary or interdisciplinary terms (approaches that keep structures of knowledge in place), this view suggests the coming together of language-oriented projects (social or educational endeavours that involve language), practical theories of language (different ways of approaching linguistic questions) and critical appraisals (ethical, material and political concerns). As applied linguists, we may not be interested so much in developing theories about language as in doing stuff with language: language policies, translations, language education, language in aviation and so on. To do so, however, we have to start to take responsibility for the ways we think about language. Approaches to language that derive from attempts to describe language structures or to account for language use in structural terms
may be counterproductive. The terrain has changed from when applied linguistics was first seen as the application of linguistic knowledge to real-world contexts. We can now start to think seriously about practical theories of language or ways of thinking about language that derive from contexts of practice.

1.1 RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES, SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGIES AND CRITICAL APPRAISALS

Following Latour’s (2004) warning that critical work has focused for too long on the construction of reality (regimes of truth, orders of discourse, discursive production) rather than also making its own claims to reality, I extend the critical realist position developed by Block (2022), though with a number of twists. Drawing on Bhaskar’s (1989) work, Block (2022) makes a case for a form of critical realism based on an argument for an external reality (there is an external, real world), a relativist position on epistemologies (there are different ways of getting at this reality) and a rationalist mode of judgement (we need to be able to decide between these competing takes on the world). Drawing on Haslanger’s (2012) critical social realism, the implications of the ontological turn in the social sciences (see later in this chapter and Chapter 2) and a concern about how to ground any critical project in the field (Pennycook, 2021a), I take a slightly different view. I argue for a form of relational ontology (Barad, 2007; Escobar, 2016, 2018) that emphasizes both the multiple and the relational qualities of existence. A key argument throughout this book will be that there is not just one ontology: the world is plural. This ontological stance has implications for the discussions of languages in other chapters, not as different understandings of the same thing but as different things. This focus derives from various quarters: the ontological turn in the social sciences (and particularly anthropology), a response to the recent ontological panic about what it means to question the existence of languages and an increased interest across the field in raising ontological questions (Demuro and Gurney, 2021; Hall and Wicaksono, 2020; Kell and Budach, 2024).

This perspective cuts across the book but is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, where I outline what it means to look at questions of being from a pluralist (relational) stance and questions of knowing from a social stance. In line with Haslanger’s (2012) critical social realism, and her scepticism about the usefulness of positing some kind of independent reality (neither a dependent nor an independent
reality is very plausible), I am interested in the implications of social construction, or rather the importance of understanding different kinds of social construction, the ways things may be socially distinguished, constituted or caused (Haslanger, 1995; Sveinsdóttir, 2015). Epistemologies are obviously plural – we have many different ways of thinking about the world – but rather than Block’s epistemological relativism, following Haslanger (2012), I insist on social epistemologies, entailing a focus less on the relativism of epistemologies than on their social nature. This view of epistemology aims to understand the social, cultural and political interests of different epistemological positions, how social epistemologies work, how forms of knowledge derive from social orders. It also, as will be argued later, by no means suggests that things that are social constructs are not real.

Critical social realism needs ways of deciding between alternatives. From Block’s (2022) point of view, a form of rational judgmentalism enables the critical realist to link a critical project to an ontological realism by looking analytically at the different epistemologies. I take a slightly different approach in this book: while we should be cautious not to throw rationalism out just because of its ties to particular modes of so-called Enlightenment thought (rationalism can be salvaged from this history), we need a clearer set of ethical and ideological principles on which to evaluate ways of thinking. Once epistemologies are viewed in social rather than relativist terms, the seeds of critical evaluation have already been sown: we can look at different understandings of the world in terms of the interests they serve. By assuming relational ontologies, the goal is no longer to use this judgemental position to decide on which epistemologies best account for a given reality, but to explore how ontologies, epistemologies and ideologies are intertwined (or assembled).

A key framework for this book, therefore, is a form of critical social realism that allows for more than one reality, grounds epistemologies in social relations and takes a critical-ethical position on choosing between different versions of the world. The next chapter lays out these basic concerns, explains why they matter and discusses questions of ontology – what language is – and the ontological turn in the social sciences. In Chapters 3 and 4, in line with the thinking of

2 Neither Haslanger’s metaphysical realism nor Bhaskar’s transcendental realism, however, accords with the relational ontological position I am trying to establish here.

3 Although Block names his epistemological stance as relativist, emphasizing the array of ways of getting at reality, he also, as I understand his position, emphasizes the importance of the social bases of knowledge.
Demuro and Gurney (2021), I focus on language as structure, language as practice and language as assemblage. These by no mean exhaust possible language ontologies, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. If we ask what ontological position has been taken on language by mainstream linguistics over the last century or so, the answer is, fairly uncontroversially, language as structure (or object or system). For much of its modern history, linguistics has taken an ontological stance on language as a structural entity, with a wide set of implications for how languages are understood as bounded entities. Linguists might immediately object to this, suggesting that structuralism was a passing phase of linguistics, and that things have moved on since then, but this is to confuse ontological and epistemological stances. Structuralism was a particular epistemological position, related of course to the ontological position on language as a structure, but the ontology of language as a structure has outlasted structuralist epistemologies.

This is not about the different epistemological approaches to a structural version of language – various schools of linguistics, or whether structuralist linguistics was superseded by generativist or even functional schools of linguistics – but about the basic ontological assumptions about what language is. A structural ontology made it possible to treat language as an object amenable to scientific study, enabling descriptions of languages around the world and facilitating many advances in our understandings of languages as structural entities. Yet this very tendency towards seeing languages as autonomous systems has enabled those forms of thinking that emphasize boundedness. A significant argument in this book is that this ontology – language as structure – has remained a cornerstone of linguistic analysis and may only be helpful in limited sociolinguistic and applied linguistic cases. It is this ontology – with its underlying assumptions about bounded systems – that often leads to confusion when linguists are criticized for assuming languages to be discrete, countable entities, a position they may also disavow.

This discussion will be of particular importance in Chapter 3, where I try to disentangle some of the translanguaging debates: simply put, the two sides of the discussion are often talking about different things, language as structure and language as practice (though without always being clear about their own ontological assumptions). Because structural and social (practice) language ontologies are so different, the debates about translanguaging have become mired in misunderstandings. The idea of ‘a language’, Blackledge and Creese (2014, p.1) suggest, ‘may be important as a social construct, but it is
not suited as an analytical lens through which to view language practices’. The discussions around codeswitching versus translanguaging often hinge on this problem: people are talking about different things, some focusing on language as structure (How do we account for one language or another being used in a particular context?), others on language practices (What are people doing with different linguistic elements?). Language as a social practice (not to be confused with sociolinguistics) puts the emphasis on language as something we do.

The idea of language as something we do is not always easily expressed in English, hence either the addition of the term ‘practices’ to language, literacy and so on, or the creating of variants of ‘languaging’, a term with a longer history than we might expect (Cowley, 2019). Proponents of polylinguaging (Jørgenson, 2008) and translanguaging (García and Li Wei, 2014) have insisted not only on the poly or trans aspects of this terminology but also on the languaging, while others have opted for translingual or translinguistic practices (Canagarajah, 2013; Lee and Dovchin, 2020). This focus on practices has a long history in sociology and anthropology, and it is revealing to reflect that the common linguistic assumption that systems or structures produce processes or practices, rather than the other way around (systems are the products of rather than the precursor to what we do), renders linguistics something of an outlier in the social sciences on this score (Ahearn, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2008). From a standard (socio)linguistic point of view, languages as entities pre-exist their instantiation, so it is possible to think in terms of ‘language use’ or ‘language in context’ or ‘codeswitching’ where the language systems come before the social activity. From an integrational linguistic point of view, by contrast, ‘first-order’ activity is seen as communicative practice, while languages as structures are only ‘second-order’ concepts (Thibault, 2011). As discussed in Chapter 3, a practice ontology turns the tables on the language-as-structure perspective and makes languaging or social practices primary.

Taking different views of language seriously may mean entertaining the possibility that languages are different things to different people. What a linguist means by language may not be at all what a non-linguist means by language. This is a question of ontology rather than epistemology. The shift from questions of knowledge to questions of being urges us to consider not so much that there is one reality that we cut up differently from different perspectives (knowledge, culture, worldview, ideology) but rather that we are dealing with different realities. For Van Dooren (2019, p.8), it is important to escape
the dominant Western belief in a single reality over which are layered various perspectives and cultures that provide different takes on this otherwise consistent world. ‘Our worlds’, he suggests, ‘are not pre-existing, static entities’. We live in a world of many worlds, or a *pluriverse* (Escobar, 2020), a means for thinking about ‘ecologies of practices across heterogeneous(ly) entangled worlds’ (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018, p.4). Such a view rejects the assumption that there is a given, independent world cut up by different worldviews, moving instead towards an understanding of entangled relationships, or assemblages.

Ontological questions cut across the book but are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. As will be discussed in the following two chapters, the recent, rather panicked reactions to discussions about whether or how languages exist need to be seen within a much longer history of sceptical appraisal, and the concern, particularly from an applied linguistic point of view, that linguistics has tended to reify its objects of inquiry, to lose the connections between language, people and the world (Corder, 1973), and to fall into the trap of the *methodological nationalism* with which languages are associated (Schneider, 2018). If we acknowledge that languages are ‘social constructions, artifacts analogous to other constructions such as time’ (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007, p.1), this does not mean the end of all language learning, activism or politics, but rather a need to think through the implications of the ‘social’ and the ‘construction’ more carefully.

What flows from the observation that languages are social constructs? If, as Cummins (2021) suggests, in the context of arguments about translanguaging (see Chapter 3), there is no dispute about the fact that languages are socially constructed, the question is what is actually therefore under dispute? If it is no longer controversial to see monolingualism and multilingualism as *inventions* (Gramling, 2016, 2021), then what is at stake here? The problem in part is that social construction can be understood in multiple ways and is often seen as implying that something constructed is not real. Hence MacSwan (2022a) assumes that a *critical constructivist* position on language (what he calls *deconstructivism*) implies that languages are fictions, while Cummins (2021) understands this in terms of languages being social artefacts with unclear edges that can nevertheless also be described in terms of their *linguistic reality* (we will return to this). Yet if we consider Haslanger’s (2012) point that gender and race are both social constructs and real, and if we draw an analogy with language, there is clearly more at stake here.
If ‘we decide that languages exist’, argues Hutton (2002, p.121), we would likewise have to concede that ‘races exist’. This point is not necessarily under dispute if we understand that to concede the existence of language or race is to concede that they are social constructs: they do not exist as anything other than socially created entities that pull together certain features – words, morphemes, hair colour, facial features – into a supposed unifying construct. As Haslanger (2012) makes clear, if we want to resist reality (oppose racism or sexism), we first have to acknowledge that race and gender are socially constructed realities. If ‘any attempt to classify and characterize different races is unscientific’, Hutton (2002, p.121) continues, ‘then any attempt to classify and characterize different languages must similarly be pseudo-science’. That is to say, it is one thing to accept that language, gender and race are real as socially produced constructs, but it is quite another to turn a scientific gaze onto each as objects of study beyond the social.

As recent raciolinguistic work has made clear, language and race are deeply entangled in many contexts (Alim, 2016; Rosa and Flores, 2017). Linguistics is ‘both the parent and the child of race theory’; the parent in the sense that linguistic categories were crucial in the development of physical anthropology in the nineteenth century, the child in the sense that linguistics has reclaimed its role as the premier science in the classification of human diversity, elaborating a “characterology” or “typology” of the world’s languages, and therefore of the world’s ethnic groups’ (Hutton, 1999, p.3). On this score, we have to appreciate the ‘contribution of linguistic theory and linguists to the murder and mayhem of twentieth century ethnic politics’ (Hutton, 2002, p.137). For these and other reasons it is incumbent on linguists of whatever sort to consider carefully what kind of realism we want to pursue: a realism that insists that languages are scientifically analysable entities or a critical social realism that insists on relational ontologies, social epistemologies and critical appraisals.

1.2 WHOSE VERSION OF LANGUAGE COUNTS?

Alongside ontological questions about what language is and what languages are, a related concern is whose version of language counts. A practical theory of language surely needs a strong relationship to how language users think about language. For Bauer and Trudgill (1998b), like Pinker (1994), the important linguistic distinction between descriptive (linguistic) and prescriptive (lay or pedagogical)