

1 Regimes of Truth in the Study of Language

1.1 Introduction

The study of language has often drawn on notions that tend to be understood from a human-centric perspective. A notion such as agency, not to mention the related ones of creativity and competence in language use, are all typically understood as stemming from the goals and desires of human actors. It is humans who have agency, it is humans who are creative and it is humans to whom competence in language use can be meaningfully attributed. Language is conceptualized as a medium, perhaps the primary medium, through which these notions are exercised and manifested.

Which brings us to yet another notion: that languages exist as identifiable and distinct varieties such as ‘English’, ‘Singlish’ and ‘Hawaiian Creole English’. Here, too, the human-centric perspective persists. These varieties are defined in terms of their affiliation with particular human communities (e.g. ‘native speakers’, ‘learners’, ‘migrants’, ‘colonizers’).

Thus, when claims are made about how to understand or analyse linguistic behaviour, the reliance on these notions – with their anthropocentric interpretations – makes it ‘obvious’ that we are looking at activities that are fundamentally human in orientation. Even when not explicitly highlighted in discussions about language, these notions are nevertheless usually in the background. Consequently, they go on to inform the kinds of conclusion that can be considered ‘sensible’.

There is at work here a ‘regime of truth’, where what counts as true is the result of an institutionalized series of practices that regulate the production, distribution and circulation of statements (Foucault 1977: 14). In the case of the study of language, current academic orthodoxy makes it almost unthinkable to question the anthropocentric orientation involved (although see Pennycook 2018).

The goal of this section is to make the case that there are serious problems with this anthropocentric stance. The next section then outlines an alternative approach, described as posthumanism (Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Pennycook 2018). And the sections that follow focus on specific implications of posthumanism for the study of world Englishes. To clarify, the aim is not to trivialize or dismiss the role of human actors. Rather, the objective is to better understand the place of human activity in relation to language without assuming as a default or as axiomatic that human practices must take pride of place as the source of how language is being manifested or how it is to be analysed.

This might suggest that we are merely replacing one regime of truth with another. But the shift to newer regimes of truth is neither trivial nor a simple matter of substitution. It is hard won given the entrenched status of orthodoxies

and the concomitant difficulties involved in reconceptualizing what has heretofore been taken as ‘common sense’. More importantly, it is something that must be attempted not least because the current regime of truth is problematic. In the next section, I touch on two such problems, one relating to agency and the other relating to communities and language varieties.

1.2 Cracks in Current ‘Truths’ about Language

1.2.1 Agency

The matter of agency has long bedevilled social theorists. There have been proposals that the locus of agency lies within the individual, in human-created and inherited social structures or that it emerges from some kind of dialectic between the two (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Goffman 1956; Parsons 1937; Simmel 1976). These proposals all share the idea that agency must have some localizable human fount, an idea that the study of language in society has taken on board as well.

For example, in an influential and critical discussion of agency in language policy, Tollefson (1991) distinguishes between the neoclassical and historical-structural approaches. The neoclassical approach emphasizes the rational and individualistic nature of choices. As an illustration, individuals may choose to learn a new language because of certain perceived benefits such as access to a better job. Or they may decide that the time and money spent on learning a new language may not be worth the potential benefits and hence they may not make the effort to expand their linguistic repertoire. Whatever the outcome, the neoclassical approach treats these as decisions that are freely, rationally and individually made.

The historical-structural approach, in contrast, emphasizes inherited constraints and resources. For example, in a society in which English is the medium of instruction, a student from a minority ethnic community and whose home language is not English will face different challenges in doing well scholastically than someone whose home language is also English will. Such a situation is faced by Vietnamese migrants to America (Tollefson 1991). Adult migrants are required to attend English-language classes while juggling these classes with work and trying to acculturate to a new society. Their children, too, face social and linguistic adaptation challenges in school. The difficulties and problems faced by them cannot be dismissed as being due to individual laziness or lack of discipline – as they would be under the neoclassical approach.

From a language policy perspective, the neoclassical approach assumes that successes or failures in language policy can and must be laid at the feet of the individual. The historical-structural approach, by way of contrast, gives greater

attention to how macro-social and historical forces need to be considered as contributing to the differential distribution of privileges and handicaps. The major differences between the two approaches are summarized by Wiley (1996: 115):

- The unit of analysis employed: While the neoclassical approach focuses on individual choices, the historical-structural pays attention to relationships between groups.
- The role of the historical perspective: The neoclassical is more interested in the current language situation; the historical-structural, in contrast, emphasizes the role of sociohistorical factors.
- Criteria for evaluating plans and policies: The neoclassical is primarily amoral in its outlook; policies are evaluated in terms of how efficiently they achieve their goals. The historical-structural is more sensitive to the issue of domination, exploitation and oppression.
- The role of the social scientist: Consistent with its amoral outlook, the neoclassical assumes that the social scientist must and can approach language problems in an apolitical manner. In contrast, the historical-structural views political stances as inescapable so that ‘those who avoid political questions inadvertently support the status quo’.

Tollefson’s distinction between the two approaches is intended to raise questions such as ‘Why must that individual expend those particular costs?’; ‘Why are those particular benefits rather than others available to that individual?’; ‘What are the costs and benefits for other people in the community?’ (1991: 32). Tollefson’s position is that the neoclassical approach has been all too dominant. Countering this with the historical-structural approach would instead shift the focus to examining ‘the historical basis of policies and to make explicit the mechanisms by which policy decisions serve or undermine particular political and economic interests’ (Wiley 1996: 32).

Although Tollefson’s distinction makes important points, problems still remain. Positioning the issue of agency as a series of dichotomies – between individual and group, between the ahistorical and the historical, between the apolitical and the political – retains the assumption that agency has an identifiable human locus, either individual or group, with Tollefson coming down in favour of the latter.

More recently, but in a similar vein, Spolsky (2009) has called for attention to be given to language management. It is certainly not unreasonable to talk about language management since there are clearly attempts by various authorities (parents, teachers, politicians, etc.) to influence the language practices of targeted populations (children, students, communities). Where this kind of

talk becomes problematic, however, is when we assume that the agency of management is isolatable and can be unequivocally identified, as Spolsky (2009: 6; emphasis added) seems to propose:

Management . . . is not automatically successful. It presupposes a manager . . .
As a rule, I will take the position that it is management only when we can identify the manager.

The idea of an identifiable manager again involves the assumption that there is a definable locus of human agency and it returns us to the problems that plagued Tollefson's distinction between the neoclassical and the historical-structural. But trying to identify the manager in this way raises complicated questions about agency such as the following (Ahearn 2001: 8):

Can agency only be the property of an individual? What types of supra-individual agency might exist? . . . Similarly, we might also be able to talk about agency at the sub-individual level . . . thereby shedding light on things like internal dialogues and fragmented subjectivities? . . . Another avenue for potential research involves investigating theories of agency that people in other cultures or speech communities might espouse . . . Who do they believe can exercise agency?

Such complications arise because even a body such as 'the government', 'the ministry' or 'the community' is really an abstraction over multiple sub-entities (themselves potentially recursively sub-dividable) so that 'internal dialogues and fragmented subjectivities' apply no less to organizations and groups than they do to individuals. Once this is recognized, then it is important to acknowledge that any attempt at identifying the language manager can be controversial and complex, not least because there are also often culture-specific beliefs about what kinds of entity can exercise agency, the manner in which such agency is exercised and the nature of the evidence considered relevant in diagnosing the activity of an agent.

In addition to the distributed nature of agency, there is another problem. This is the tendency to downplay if not dismiss the roles of non-human entities. Yet, as Bennett (2010: 34) observes:

No one really knows what human agency is, or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery. If we do not know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the processes through which nonhumans make their mark are qualitatively different?

A good illustration of what Bennett means is provided by Latour (Hazard 2013: 66; emphasis added):

The theorist and anthropologist Bruno Latour – whose ‘network’ from actor-network theory is for our purposes a concept loosely equivalent to ‘assemblage’ – represents this idea with exceptional clarity in his analysis of a central claim of the National Rifle Association (NRA) (1999: 176–80). According to Latour, the NRA’s braying insistence that ‘guns don’t kill people, people kill people’ is premised on more anthropocentric understandings of agency that treat material things such as guns as diligent *instruments of human volition*. Latour contends, on the contrary, that once a person picks up a gun, she or he is not quite the same person as before. Guns, among other things, when connected with humans, make up *new networks or assemblages that embolden or enable certain kinds of actions*, specifically, killing. (One would not use the barrel of a gun to arrange a bouquet of roses, after all.) A shared human recognition of the gun’s violent potential – drawn from, say, the news and films – induces an affective reaction on the part of the holder, who might feel powerful and dangerous. The physical heft of the gun and the contours and textures of its surfaces may reinforce such feelings and accentuate an inclination to violence. Its trigger, which is shaped to accommodate a finger, directs human activation of a bullet. And, of course, the speed of the bullet enables a murder far more easily than if one set out to kill with his or her bare hands. According to Latour, when a person kills with a gun, it is not only the person who kills. It is the larger assemblage that kills. Its murderous agency is distributed across its many parts including a finger, a trigger, a bullet, a human brain, violent films, and so on. *Agency is always complex agency, unlocalizable and distributed across assemblages of both humans and things.*

Latour’s example neatly illustrates the problem with restricting agency to human actors such that non-human entities are seen as mere ‘instruments of human volition’. However, the person who is holding a gun has agency in a way that is different than a person not holding gun – even if both have the desire or intention to kill. The combination ‘person + gun + intention to kill’ constitutes a new network or assemblage that allows for some types of action over others. Taking this insight seriously means recognizing that agency is not only ‘unlocalizable’; it is also ‘distributed across assemblages of both humans and things’.

‘Assemblage’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) is a technical concept with major implications for the study of language. This is because an assemblage can be made up of a highly diverse and ad hoc set of elements and it has no central organizing agent (Bennett 2010: 23–4). One of the things that the next section will discuss is what it means to think of language as an assemblage. For now, I move on to the second problem with the current regime of truth.

1.2.2 Communities and Language Varieties

In a critical survey of the sociological roots of sociolinguistic theorizing, Williams (1992) points out that sociolinguistics has largely taken on board the

structural functionalist idea of society as a complex system with mutually dependent parts that work together harmoniously (Durkheim 1933; Parsons 1971). As he (Williams 1992: 228) explains:

This social system, despite its internal diversity, was conceived of as an integrated whole. Integration was associated with the idea of social equilibrium. A society in a state of equilibrium was one devoid of conflict, with every member knowing what was expected of him/her in any role, and where such expectations were constantly met.

Language, in this conception, is ‘merely a mirror of society . . . not so much social, as a representation of the social’ (Williams 1992: 231). Such a view of language served the purpose of establishing sociolinguistics in the early days as a distinctive field of inquiry, allowing the field, as Blommaert (2016: 243) observes, to emphasize ‘clear, distinct, and stable units that can become sociolinguistic units: the speech community, the dialect or language area, and language (or dialect, sociolect, etc.) itself’. As a reflection of a structural functionalist conception of society, these sociolinguistic units also emphasized shared understandings and consensus. Differences and conflicts were either of minor interest or seen as signalling the transition to a new equilibrium.

This view of language and its relation to society has, in recent times, come under scrutiny. Consider phenomena such as globalization and language contact, both of which have significance when studying how language varieties emerge. Globalization is all too often treated as a primarily economic phenomenon (Perrons 2004: 35–54; Wade 2001) even though it is, in fact, a highly multidimensional set of processes that also include the political, technological and cultural (Giddens 2002: 10; Kennedy 2001: 8). The key characteristic of globalization is, as Giddens (1990: 64) points out, ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations which link localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’. This intensification is facilitated (some might even say ‘exacerbated’) by developments and advances in communication and transportation technologies that allow individuals and communities to more easily maintain contact with multiple groups across the globe.

As far as language contact is concerned, this means that it is not only people who are mobile and who therefore bring with them their language practices as they move from one place to another. Languages, too, can move, even without speakers, since media technologies also allow for the relatively rapid and widespread dissemination of language resources – in the form of what we might think of as cultural texts – through processes of spamming, streaming and downloading as well as, of course, the more traditional media of radio,

movies and television. The dissemination of popular culture, for instance, is not so much via interactions between groups of speakers as it is about how speakers come to appropriate culturally transmitted words and phrases as a result of textually mediated encounters through social media and various streaming services.

However, the traditional focus in language contact studies has tended to be informed by the assumption that different language types (e.g. pidgins, creoles) arise as bounded groups of speakers come to interact with one another. Even outside contact situations, trying to rely on specific community types to anchor varieties of language has proved problematic. Early references to ‘language community’ (Laitin 2000) were replaced by ‘speech community’ (Labov 1972) and the latter itself became contentious because of the need to acknowledge the ‘plurilingual’ nature of any community (Silverstein 1996).

The movements of people and language resources, then, raise interesting challenges and issues for our contemporary understanding of language, requiring a rethink of those assumptions that sociolinguistics has inherited. Where the movement of people is concerned, mobility no longer necessarily means loss of contact with the home community. For example, the time that a migrant spends living and working in the host community need not result in a reduction in the frequency of interactions with friends and family members back home. There is actually no single homogeneous entity that we can meaningfully describe as ‘the migrant’, since the relevant factors that influence a person’s decision to migrate are extremely varied. Faist (2000: 37) gives us a sense of just how varied these factors can be, when he notes that they:

may be related to improving and securing: wealth (e.g. income), status (e.g. prestigious job), comfort (e.g. better working and living conditions), stimulation (e.g. experience, adventure, and pleasure), autonomy (e.g. high degree of personal freedom), affiliation (e.g. joining friends or family), exit from oppression of all kinds, meaningful life (e.g. improving society), better life for one’s children, and morality (e.g. leading a virtuous life for religious reasons). In this view the potential migrant could not only be a worker, a member of a household or a kinship group, but also a voter, a member of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political groups, a member of a persecuted minority, or a devotee of arts or sports.

The result of all this variation is what has sometimes been called ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007). As Blommaert and Rampton (2016: 22) point out, ‘[s]uperdiversity is characterized by a tremendous increase in the categories of migrants, not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion, but also in terms of motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labor and housing markets of the host societies, and so on’ (cf.

Vertovec 2010). The predictability of the category of ‘migrant’ and of his/her sociocultural features has disappeared. While it may have once been feasible to understand the impact of migration on language contact by identifying specific waves of migration patterns, it is not clear that such an approach would still be feasible under the conditions of late modernity (Rampton 2006).

Where the movement of language resources is concerned, the comments by Stroud and Prinsloo (2015: ix–x) are pertinent:

Traditionally, studies of moving words have been filtered through bounded notions of language and community. From this perspective, linguistic forms are treated as belonging to (expert) speakers of the community, as displaying structural integrity and as being targets of acquisition by learners . . . But what if mobility, far from being an aberration or exception, is actually the normal state of affairs? What if instead of viewing linguistic mobility through the lens of a localist idea of language, the tables were turned and language was viewed through the lens of mobility? . . . Power geometries of language are at work when linguistic forms travel – some travel well and others not so well. When the places and spaces across which words move are ‘filled with codes, customs, rules, expectations and so forth’ (Blommaert 2005: 73) with their indexical orders, the significance and value of particular forms of language are recalibrated.

Thus, Heller (2008: 505) has highlighted ‘the limits of the utility of fixed sociolinguistic or linguistic variables or of fixed correspondences between language (understood as a whole, bounded system), individual social position within stable communities, and community boundaries’ in dealing with the flows, transformations and circulations of linguistic and other semiotic resources.

However, even these critiques of the relationship between language use and community do not go far enough in questioning the anthropocentric orientation that undergirds much of language studies. Consider the fact that language is becoming increasingly automated. It is undeniable that various technological advancements ranging from relatively simple computer programmes to highly developed artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly involved in our use of language for communication.

Take, as just one example, the by now ubiquitous use of automated signs at car parks to indicate to drivers if a carpark is full and, if not, just how many empty lots are actually available. Thus, a driver who is approaching a carpark may, variously, encounter a sign that says ‘Carpark full’ or one that says, for instance, ‘86 lots available’. The automated sign at the entrance to the carpark is obviously intended to be communicative, having been programmed to take note of the number of cars that are already present in the carpark and to convey in real

time the relevant information (i.e. how many lots are still empty) to drivers who may be thinking of parking their cars there. In a multi-storey carpark, drivers may even be told of how any empty lots available are actually distributed over the different levels (e.g. ‘Level 3, 24’, ‘Level 4, 35’).

This raises the question of how we are supposed to conceptualize the communicative act. Presumably we wish to avoid anthropomorphizing the carpark sign and thus to avoid attributing intentions to the sign. Nevertheless, we would still need to take a position on whether the Gricean Cooperative Principle with its related Maxims ought to be considered applicable. Does it make sense, for example, to assert that the machine is being cooperative, that it is perhaps observing the Maxim of Quality? And given that the machine has been programmed to convey information in a syntactically and lexically restricted manner, would we want to suggest that the brevity of its message shows that it is not in violation of the Maxim of Manner? And if our stance is instead that the Gricean Principle is not applicable, what then are the available conceptual alternatives?¹

Certainly, we would want to acknowledge that whoever programmed and installed the machine intended it to be useful and that its usefulness includes conveying the relevant information in as brief and clear a manner as possible. So, Grice’s ideas might be still applicable if we treat the communication as coming from the programmer. This position is not without problems of its own, however. Bringing in the programmer into the pragmatics of the carpark communication event so as to justify the applicability of Grice’s ideas assumes that the programmer is yet another human being. Qua human being, it is then unproblematic to attribute to this entity the kinds of intention and goal ordinarily discussed in relation to Grice. However, in the case where some form of communicative technology has been created by a computer programme, then the same questions about how to understand the communicative pragmatics arise once again.

This latter scenario is not as farfetched as it seems because machines are already capable of writing their own code (Galeon 2017). As programmes get more sophisticated and autonomous (see the discussion below on chatbots), it becomes more difficult and less plausible to equate the intentions of a programme with those of its programmer. But if we separate the intentions of the programmer from the programme itself, do we still have any grounds for attributing intentions to the programme? And we do indeed need to separate the programmer from the programme. This is because the specific information that is being conveyed at any one time about the state of the carpark (e.g. the actual

¹ See Wee (under preparation) for a detailed discussion of these matters.

number of lots available at any particular date and time) is not something that the programmer is likely even to be aware of. The information is gathered and conveyed via programmed sensors that are independent of the programmer (which is, of course, the whole point of the programming).

Another example involves the concept of an echoborg. An echoborg is a person whose utterances and gestures are determined to varying degrees by the communications that originate from an artificial intelligence programme. An echoborg is a specific kind of cyranoid (the latter term is clearly inspired by Rostand's play *Cyrano de Bergerac*). A cyranoid is defined by Corti and Gillespie (2015: 30) in the following manner:

A cyranoid is created by cooperatively joining in real-time the body of one person with speech generated by another via covert speech shadowing. The resulting hybrid persona can subsequently interact with third parties face-to-face.

As Corti and Gillespie (2015: 30) observe, 'naïve interlocutors perceive a cyranoid to be a unified, autonomously communicating person'. In the case of an echoborg, the artificial intelligence is joined with a human surrogate such that the latter then becomes the public and human face of the former. Lamb (2015) provides a succinct description of what might happen with echoborgs:

AIs use human surrogates or 'echoborgs' to speak their words and socialize with humans. The living, breathing avatar simply recites the computer's words at the conference table, serving as a humanizing conduit for an inhuman will.

The interactional goal here is to give the illusion that one is communicating with a fellow human being when, in fact, the communication originates from an artificial intelligence. The human with whom one is apparently communicating is really working at the behest of the artificial intelligence. Echoborgs can be useful since some individuals might feel more comfortable if they think they are interacting with another human even though the kinds of information and advice they want is better and more efficiently provided by an artificial intelligence.

Regardless, this 'synching' of a human front with messages that are created by an artificial intelligence raises conceptual issues such as the nature of speakerhood. Who exactly is speaking under such a condition where the activity of speaking is distributed over more than one entity? Is it the human extension or is it the artificial intelligence; or is such a binary approach misguided? Even if we were to decide, say, that the human extension is properly the speaker, we would still need to explain how we intend to understand the role played by artificial