

Reflections on a post-positivist study of migration and language

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Approaches to Migration, Language & Identity
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Introduction

Post-pandemic
consequences

Nativism &
strangers in
quarantined
societies

Progressive
neoliberalism in the
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Opportunities &
limits for discourse
studies

References

Introduction

- ▶ the Covid-19 pandemic as a context of social crisis
- ▶ challenges for social cohesion: communal existence & public debate
- ▶ theorising identity: Ahmed's theory of the stranger
- ▶ the Covid-19 pandemic showcases the problems of progressive neoliberalism

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Challenges: consequences of pandemic measures

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- ▶ EU values questioned: immediate reaction was to close borders for citizens but not for goods/transport, ignoring the fact that much of EU life is already cross-country
- ▶ xenophobia against immigrants (e.g. *temporeros* in Spain) and Asians particularly (“Chinese virus”)
- ▶ general suspicion against those crossing borders (travel → tourism, migrants)
- ▶ resurging intuitions about nation states → danger coming from outside the body (& body politic)

Challenges: Exclusion in public debates

- ▶ aggression against those who are perceived to ignore rules → desire for clear guidelines and authority in “post-normal science” (Post et al. 2021) (=knowledge production in the absence of accepted knowledge)
- ▶ condescending discourse (“covidiot”, “cult of corona”...) → neologisms show need for insults
- ▶ problematic dialogic contraction (Baxter 2011) and exclusion → closure also of mental borders

Challenges from a discourse perspective

- ▶ any discourse is “organised around practices of exclusion” (Mills 2004: 11) and “battles for truth” (Foucault 1980: 132)
 - ▶ but power relations that obtain should be studied & questioned
 - ▶ are shallow views of “truth”/“facts” being promoted?
 - ▶ *the science* to persuade on the interpersonal rather than logical level (Taylor 2010; Pérez-González 2020)
 - ▶ *conspiracy theorist* as sanctioning device (Husting 2018; Vogel 2018)
- ↪ Foucault’s “will to truth” tends to produce stricter mechanisms of exclusion (Mills 2004: 60); also in post-pandemic world

Consequences for communal existence

- ↪ nativism and lack of social cohesion will benefit radical right
 - ▶ moment has the chance to propel authoritarian dynamics → interdisciplinary effort necessary to maintain open discourse and intercultural exchange
 - ▶ two theories on estrangements that impact social cohesion
 1. “them and us”: identity & strangers
 2. progressive neoliberalism as social configuration

Individual identities in societies (Ahmed 2000: 7)

- ▶ subjects are constituted through the encounter
- ▶ “Given that the subject comes into existence as an entity only through encounters with others, then the subject’s existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered.” (Ahmed 2000: 7)

↪ we *are* not until we encounter someone else

- ▶ interesting analogy between bodies and texts:

To make the encounter prior to the form of the text (what the text would be within itself) is, not only to refuse to assume that the text or reader have an independent existence, but also to suggest that it is through being read that the text comes to life as text (Ahmed 2000: 7)

↪ poststructuralist critique of essentialism, of a clearly defined ego → our identity & existence are shaped and defined by our encounters

Theorising identity: recognising strangers

- ▶ how do we “recognise” a stranger?
- ▶ “to re-cognise” = “to know again”
- ▶ the encounter with a stranger is not an encounter with the unknown, but precisely with the “already known” (Ahmed 2000)
- ▶ it is the recognition of an Other through ways of distinguishing the strange and the familiar

Stranger danger from outside the body

- ▶ the *stranger* becomes constituted as such through proximity → “stranger fetishism” (Ahmed 2000)
contemporary discourses of globalisation and multiculturalism involve the reproduction of the figure of the stranger, and the enforcement of boundaries, through the very emphasis on becoming, hybridity and inbetweenness (Ahmed 2000: 13)
- ▶ to say the stranger is *now* close by would be to assume that the stranger was distant in the past
- ▶ how has proximity changed in quarantined and post-social-distancing societies?
- ▶ task: analyse different *modes* of proximity to strangers (globalisation, migration, multiculturalism) without assuming that the stranger was distant in the past

Progressive neoliberalism

- ▶ my assumptions/biases:
 - ▶ all language is political → discourse analysis is inherently political (Gee 2011: 10)
 - ▶ discourse analysis is generally driven by leftist rather than right-wing values → critiques generally inform leftist thought
- ▶ Fraser's critique of *progressive neoliberalism* (2017; 2018) → combination of
 - ▶ “progressive recognition”: a spoken orientation towards diversity, multiculturalism, women's rights...
 - ▶ “regressive distribution”: the politics of deregulation of the banking system, deindustrialisation and the elimination of social protection

Problem: moral distinctions

- ▶ progressive professionals' confidence that they epitomise moral cosmopolitanism and cognitive enlightenment (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018: 208)

↪ generated the

Bourdieuian strategy of “distinction”, imbuing progressive neoliberalism with a superior “tone”, which has devolved all too easily into moralising, fingerpointing, and talking down to rural and working-class people, with the insinuation that they were culturally stupid (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018: 208)

↪ explains the resentment felt by many towards the supposedly progressive, liberal, leftist cause, as “the insult of status hierarchy compounded the injury of class domination” (Fraser & Jaeggi 2018: 208)

- ▶ easily observable in Covid-19 crisis

Towards a post-positivist approach?

- ▶ post-positivism: rejects positivist approaches, sees knowledge as socially constituted, historically embedded & valuationally based (see Lather 2017: 14–17)
- ▶ the notion that “scientific knowledge of reality can help us escape from the falsity of ideology” (Pennycook 2001: 41) is problematic → also used by populist agitators (Bruns 2019: 114)
- ▶ attempts to “rescue” people from ideology overlook that many discourse practices aim to “explore others’ reaction to one’s identity and have it confirmed in interactions, including hostile reactions that confirm one’s status as a critical outsider” (Krämer 2017: 1302) → cement the status to be challenged into an emancipated position of its own

Limits for discourse studies

- ▶ How can Fraser's distribution & recognition model inform discourse studies?
- ▶ avoid both
 - ▶ pure relativism (reality is exclusively created by discourse)
 - ▶ pure economic determinism (social status exists outside of language and discourse)
- ▶ discourse studies can show the fundamental role of language and discourse in the shaping of identities and power relations (recognition through status hierarchies), but also remember that a significant part of power in society comes from class belonging (distribution)

Opportunities for discourse studies

- ▶ is there moral condescension in the way we study (and teach to study) language and discourse?
- ▶ dominant critical discourse theory: through an awareness of linguistic/ideological oppression based on neo-Marxist or rationalist analysis, people are empowered to bring about social change and thus achieve emancipation (Hart & Cap 2014: 2)
- ▶ Pennycook (2001: 36–41): such “emancipatory modernist” approaches are potentially patronising, often grounded in a simplistic view of ideology vs “knowable reality”

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Fascism is an act of contempt, in fact. Inversely, every form of contempt, if it intervenes in politics, prepares the way for, or establishes, Fascism.

–Albert Camus: *The rebel* (1956, Knopf, trans. by Anthony Bower)



Thank you for your attention!

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