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Critical Realism in Applied Linguistics

The Relevance of Critical Realism to Sociolinguistics

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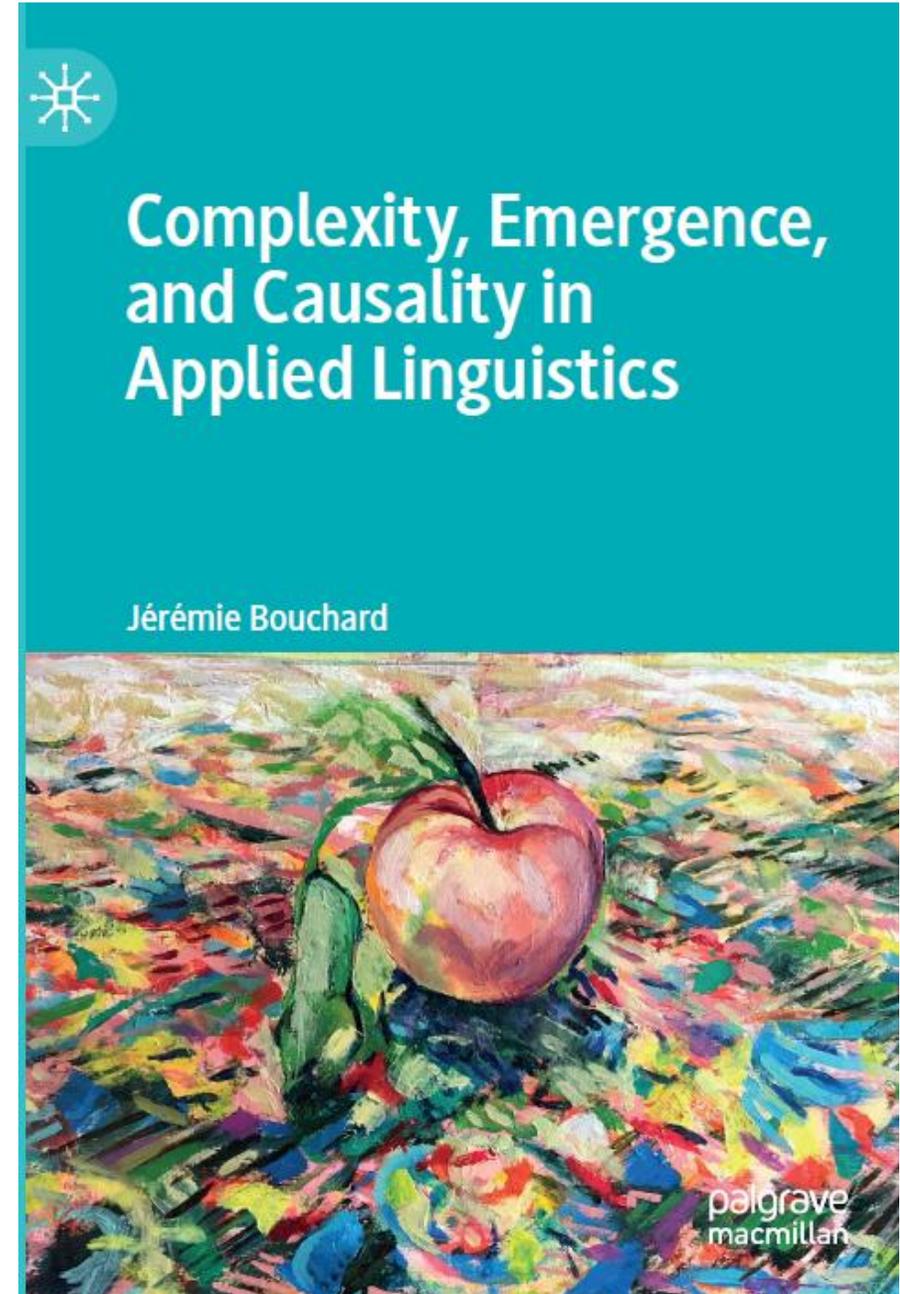
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1. Sociolinguistics: A general description
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The contents of my presentation are drawn largely from:

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As sociolinguists and applied linguists, why do we need to bother with philosophical issues?

- Research is always based on **assumptions** about our objects of inquiry, the variables in our studies, the data gathering/analysis methods we select, and what constitutes valid scientific knowledge.
- These assumptions most often fall into one of the **schools of thought** that have been identified by the philosophy of science (e.g., empiricism, positivism, interpretivism, social constructionism, realism).
- Not being aware of these assumptions, or where they come from, too often leads to the reproduction of problems in existing research (i.e., it limits our attempts to improve knowledge in our field of research).
- In contrast, by **making these assumptions explicit**, we can both overcome limitations in our work, and align our research with research conducted in other social scientific fields (e.g., anthropology, sociology, health science, law, etc.).

Important distinction

- **Ontology** = Reality as it exists, beyond our human capacity to understand it; the properties and powers of objects/phenomena.
- **Epistemology** = People's biased, linguistic, cultural, variegated, and constantly evolving understandings of reality

Why is that important?

- The dominant approach in contemporary sociolinguistics is interpretivism (prominently poststructuralism), defined by Kramsch (2012) and many other prominent sociolinguists (e.g., García et al. , 2017; Pennycook, 2013; Shohamy, 2006) as an ***epistemic stance***.
- Critical realism rejects the relativism of poststructuralism by differentiating between reality and people's understandings of it, and by emphasizing ontological questions.

Sociolinguistics: A general description

- The study of the interaction between language and society
 - *How do cultural norms, expectations, and context influence language use?*
 - *How do language policies influence language use/education on the ground?*
 - *What are the connections between language varieties and social variables such as age, social class, ethnicity, etc.?*
 - *What are language ideologies? How do they affect language use? How do they help reproduce linguistic inequalities and oppression?*
 - *How does the death of languages happen, and what can be done to counter this process?*
- **Main concern** = the explanation of multiple interacting complex linguistic and social phenomena, making sociolinguistics a truly interdisciplinary field of research.
- **Core requirement** = sociolinguists must actively engage with theories related to the study of both language and society.
- **Conclusion** = sociolinguistics needs a meta-theory, one which can be drawn from existing debates in the fields of philosophy and social theory (e.g., social constructionism, poststructuralism, critical realism).

However ...

- Sociolinguists are not necessarily showing active engagement with social theory (Bouchard, 2021; Coupland, Sarangi & Candlin, 2001; Figueroa, 1994; Lass, 1980; Mann, 2011; Rampton, 2006; Sealey & Carter, 2004; Williams, 2020).
- Instead, they tend to select specific notions from a meta-theory (e.g., “discourse”, “identity”, “fluidity”, “power”, often from poststructuralism), without unpacking them in a conceptually robust way, or making sure these notions are conceptually consistent with each other, or making sure these notions help them understand their data.

Target of my critique:

Interpretivist (or hermeneutic) sociolinguistics

- Prominent names include García, Flores & Spotti (2017), Heller (2001), Kramsch (2012, 2015), Norton (2000), Norton & De Costa (2018), Pennycook (2013, 2019), and **Rampton (2006)**.
- More common in contemporary sociolinguistics (often comes under labels such as **social constructivism**, **phenomenology** and **poststructuralism**), tends to be more qualitatively-oriented, focuses on the interpretation and critique of discourse practices, identity work and ideologies, and prioritizes the construction and interpretation of social meanings by individuals in context.
- It borrows from the anti-foundationalist philosophies of Nietzsche, Husserl, Wittgenstein and Heidegger. These philosophers opposed totalising visions of social, scientific or historical reality (i.e., *Any attempt to explain society, science or history is biased because it comes from a specific socio-historical background*). They instead preferred local narratives (i.e., *Reality is what people experience in context and how they understand these experiences*).

Interpretivism in Sociolinguistics

- It tends to overemphasize the value of interview, survey, and narrative data, by assuming that people experience social and cultural realities straightforwardly, and that their accounts of these experiences are uncluttered by the weight of theoretical deliberation.
- This reveals a problematic assumption that identity work is exclusively located at the level of human agency (i.e., voluntarism), whereas identities are antecedent resources within the Cultural System, and are tightly related to social structures.
- Although agents draw from structure and culture in context and for specific purposes, the latter cannot be reduced to issues of personal choices and identity. Therefore, while interview, survey, and narrative data can reveal how people perceive, rationalize and act upon knowledge of structure and culture, it cannot reveal direct insight into the latter. For that, theory is needed.
- Interpretivist sociolinguists also tend to reject the ontological properties of languages (e.g., English, Japanese, French, German, etc.), by assuming that meaning does not exist prior to people actually using language (e.g., meaning does not exist in books, dictionaries and other cultural resources) (see Weedon, 1987).
- This leads to the problematic notion that human agents can communicate – and create their worlds – entirely “from scratch,” without considering structural and cultural constraints and enablements, including those provided by language.

Question and Answer Session (5 minutes)

- So far, are there any aspects of my critique with which you disagree?
- Are there any notions which you think I should develop more?
- Any comments?

Critical Realism – Core Features

It rejects ...

- empiricism and positivism; science is concerned with identifying and explaining causal mechanisms
- postmodernism/poststructuralism/interpretivism; there is objective existence beyond discourse
- causal explanations as “constant conjunctions” (common in pre-test/post-test studies); how often something happens says little about why it happens; statistical data analysis without clear causal models explain very little.

It embraces ...

Ontological realism = The social world is layered or stratified, giving it ontological depth (e.g., the real, the actual, and the empirical; structure, culture, and agency)

Epistemic relativism = Our views of the world are biased, cultured/linguaged, fallible, and constantly evolving; no one has direct and unmediated access to reality

Judgmental rationality = We don't just have beliefs, feelings, or experiences, but rather beliefs *about*, feelings *towards*, and experiences *of* things. As such, we have a basis upon which to judge different subjective positions as being better or worse than others.

Critical Realist Sociolinguistics

Main objective: to transcend the **epistemic fallacy**, or the idea that statements about being (or reality whether we understand it or not) can be reduced to or analyzed in terms of statements about knowledge (contra Kramsch's view that sociolinguistics is an "epistemic stance")

Although it acknowledges that all forms of, and approaches to, knowledge are fallible, it nevertheless prioritizes **judgmental rationality**, or the idea that there are rational grounds for preferring one explanation of an objective fact over another.

What do critical realists mean by “real”?

Bhaskar’s (2008) distinction between the **empirical**, the **actual** and the **real**.

- **Empirical** = the realm of human perceptions and experiences; in social research this layer is commonly captured through quantitative data analysis, and qualitatively through interviews and/or surveys, for example.
- **Actual** = outcomes which did/do happen as opposed to all those that could have happened but did/do not. It therefore encompasses the empirical but also all events in the world, whether they are perceived by people or not.
- **Real** = includes everything: events, experiences, and causal mechanisms, which are not empirically observable, but whose existence we can conceptualize through the analysis of empirical data and the use of theory.

	The Real	The Actual	The Empirical
Mechanisms	√		
Events	√	√	
Experiences	√	√	√

Why is distinguishing between the empirical, the actual, and the real important for sociolinguists?

- It allows us to accept that individuals and communities are unique at the empirical level, but does not force us to deny the possibility that important patterns and commonalities also exist at other levels (notably the level of the real), and that these need to be accounted for. This is because structure and agency cannot be reduced to or collapsed within each other.
- With this focus on the real, critical realists can then ask *What are the characteristics and powers of the world which lead us to formulate those particular claims about it and not other claims?* (Bhaskar, 1998)
- This question helps us move beyond our biased viewpoints (what interpretivists often get entangled with), beyond empirical evidence, to focus more specifically on the level of the real (i.e., *What causal mechanisms are involved in the generation of these empirical realities I am seeing in my data?*).
- It also allows us to look beyond difference, to contemplate the possibility for consensus, solidarity, and collective action for human emancipation. (After all, the search for commonalities presupposes diversity.)

Empirical, actual and real language

- **Real language** = a set of underlying generative mechanisms and resources allowing humans to communicate and engage in meaning-making activities; includes the emergent properties of language-as-cultural-resource which both facilitate and constrain situated interaction
- **Actual language** = all linguistic phenomena which do happen – e.g., all dialects and varieties in the world – as opposed to all those that could have happened but did not.
- **Empirical language** = situated linguistic behaviours and phenomena apprehended through sensory experience and measuring tools (e.g., classroom interaction).

This stratified view presents language as both a social construction and an entity with intransitive properties (i.e., beyond situated interaction), and allows us to understand why, for example, “the structure of verb tenses in English is a human construction but not alterable by individual effort” (Mackenzie, 1998, p. 61).

The social world is also layered thusly:

- **Agency** = self-consciousness, reflexivity, emotionality, intentionality – human agents have the unique power to cause things to happen in the world through their discourses/decisions/actions.
- **Structure** = objective, pre-existing and enduring sets of social and institutional relations we experience throughout our lives as social beings and as a result of being and acting in the world. Structure both precedes and survives human involvement, and can cause things to happen not because it is intentional or reflexive (as people are) but rather by providing constraining and enabling influences upon human agency, as people attempt to fulfil their objectives within contexts and over time.
- **Culture** = the ideational realm of human experience – similar to structure in that it also enables and constrains human decisions and actions. However, it is not the same as structure (which includes the material aspects of social life). Instead, culture is composed of two distinct and emergent layers: the Cultural System and the Socio-Cultural Domain

How do critical realists conceptualize the structure-culture-agency relationship?

- Carter and New (2004, p. 3) = “People as agents and actors are influenced, though not determined, by their structural situations. **People choose what they do, but they make their choices from a structurally and culturally generated range of options – which they do not choose.**”
- **In the TESOL context** = while language teachers/learners possess the means to generate and engage in situated pedagogical experiences, their choices/actions remain profoundly structured and cultured (e.g., through language policies, curricula, textbooks, scheduling, learning materials, etc.).
- Critical realist sociolinguists should therefore reveal how agency, structure, and culture – as different layers – interact over time to produce contingent language learning phenomena, experiences and contexts.

Why is a layered viewpoint important in sociolinguistics?

- **It gives us a depth ontology**
- **Example 1 = Language development** is not a mental process taking place within the minds of individual learners exclusively, but is a complex and layered process necessitating biological, cognitive, emotional, reflexive, pedagogical, critical and social involvement (Bouchard, 2021).
- **Example 2 = The emergence of a language variety** is not just a question of people speaking differently in a specific context, but rather the result of a complex interaction between specific people's need to communicate in context for specific purposes, how they draw from and resist the standard variety of a 'larger' language or variety, historical and geographical elements, socio-economic conditions, and other structural and cultural processes.
- Each layer contains different elements with different properties and powers. To understand language development or the emergence and/or death of a language variety, we therefore need to account for these different layers and their causal interaction.
- **What goes on within one layer might very well not be aligned with what goes on within other layers. This creates tensions and contradictions, and the possibility for change.**

Discussion (10 minutes)

- Identify a particular issue or problem at your workplace which you think needs to be fixed or improved (e.g., students' lack of motivation, overemphasis on testing, the presence of negative language ideologies like native-speakerism).
- Identify the different strata or layers, and what each of them might contain. What methods would be required to study these different layers?

Eight core tenets of critical realism (in relation to sociolinguistics)

- (1) Reality exists somewhat independently from people's understandings of it.
- (2) Human understandings are profoundly conditioned by the structure of objective reality. They are not pure, unrestrained discursive creations. Also, people's language/cultured viewpoints allow them to gain reliable insight into objective reality (including the systemic properties of linguistic inequalities).
- (3) Sociolinguists should therefore be relative about knowledge but not about objective reality. Science and scientific progress are possible precisely because scientists are able to recognize the presence of an ontological realm distinct from their understandings of it, and constantly calibrate and sharpen their accounts of it (Bhaskar, 1998).
- (4) The focus for sociolinguistics is consequently ontological rather than epistemological. This allows sociolinguists to produce scientific knowledge not relative to the group that produces it, but rather knowledge subjected to criticism from multiple directions and research traditions.
- (5) The core ontological question guiding critical realist inquiries is *What are the characteristics of reality which lead people/scientists to formulate the kinds of understanding they have of it?*
- (6) This question leads to a broad range of interrogations about (a) the nature of science, knowledge, discourse as layered/stratified phenomena, and (b) the ethical nature of science, including sociolinguistics.
- (7) Social constructions (e.g., language, discourse, ideology, linguistic and social oppression) are layered/ontologically stratified, possessing both transitive and intransitive properties, while profoundly related to objective, material realities. As emergent entities, they become cultural/structural resources acting as constraining and enabling forces upon human agency.
- (8) While humans can transform their existence and the world to some extent, they can do so mainly through collective agency (e.g., although a person can adjust his/her speech patterns in context, (s)he cannot transform a language variety through individual might). This is because agency is never outside society, but rather always structured/cultured.

Applied linguistic/sociolinguistic research informed by (critical) realism

- **Belz (2002)** explores socio-institutional dimensions of German-American telecollaboration and the ways in which they may shape foreign language learning and use. From a *social*/realist angle, Belz considers the interaction between social context, institutional setting, situated activity and individual agency, respectively, to provide a rich and multi-faceted characterization of foreign language learning in the context of telecollaborative partnership.
- **Block (2006, 2007, 2015)** began his research with a marked focus on identity issues, and now provides an elaborate and insightful analysis of the impact of social class distribution on language learning and use from a critical realist angle (in his 2021 volume, Pennycook – a previously devout poststructuralist AL scholar – cites Block at length).
- **Bouchard (2017, 2020)** advocates a social realist approach to studying the presence, influence and resilience of ideology within language learning contexts.
- **Bouchard (2021)** argues that AL scholarship has long been dominated by successionist and interpretivist approaches, explores the centrality of complexity, emergence and causality in AL scholarship, to then promote a CDST-informed critical realist alternative. This book draws extensively from the Sealey and Carter (2004) volume and extends the discussion further to integrate complexity theory within a realist applied linguistics.
- **Bouchard (2022)** argues that applied linguistic research and practice are profoundly critical endeavors requiring active engagement with theory, criticizes the current interpretivist tendency in critical applied linguistics, and discusses the value of a critical realist alternative.
- **Bouchard and Glasgow (2019)** conceptualize a critical realist approach to the study of agency in language policy and planning.
- **Bouchard and Glasgow (2022)** summarize prominent views on agency in the social sciences and in second language acquisition research specifically, provide a realist view of agency in language studies, and highlight some important pedagogical implications.
- **Corson (1997)** emphasizes the relationship between theory and practice in applied linguistics, and argues that critical realism is well-suited to the task of transforming applied linguistics into a field of human knowledge equipped with a more inclusive theory of knowledge.
- **Jones (2003)** uses critical realism to re-evaluate Chomsky's linguistic theories, debunk the common labeling of Chomsky's work as scientific realism, and highlight the possibilities of a renewed linguistics informed by critical realism.
- **Jordan-Baker (2013)** studies the social ontology of language and the role of speakers within the creation and reproduction of language. His moderate realist perspective (somewhat in contrast to that of Bhaskar) leads him to draw clear distinctions between the natural and the social sciences.
- **Sealey and Carter (2004)** offer perhaps the most elaborate effort towards the creation of a realist applied linguistics. The authors draw extensively from social theory to overcome enduring problems posed by both successionist and interpretivist approaches to AL research, and argue that sociolinguistics research needs social theory to understand the relationship between speaker and system, the role of language in the creation, maintenance and change of social institutions, and the role of human agency in sociolinguistic phenomena.
- **Sealey (2010)** offers a valuable resource book specifically aimed at helping beginner AL scholars (particularly sociolinguists interested in exploring and using various approaches to discourse analysis), situates AL scholarship within the social sciences, and explains the complex and multiple links between concepts/theories and the practical aspects of AL research. Sealey also unpacks the ontological basis from which to distinguish between different types of linguistic evidence, and reiterate from a variety of angles the need for triangulation in realist AL research.
- **Zotzmann (2017)** focuses on teachers' use of English language textbooks, and conducts an analysis of interview data to offer a critical realist conceptualization of intersectionality in the context of English language teaching in Mexico.

Critical Realism Network (facebook)



Critical Realism Network

Public group · 1.0K members

Website: <http://criticalrealismnetwork.org/>

YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/CriticalRealismNetwork/videos>

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