



THE MULTILINGUAL TURN IN SLA AND THE PRAXIS OF DECOLONIAL FISSURE

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ABSTRACT

Recent debates over the notion of the multilingual turn in applied linguistics in general and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in particular clearly reflect the robustness of the notion in the fields. Yet, what is often ignored in the debate is the fact the notion itself is by nature problematic, and, as a consequence, the discussion of its realization in the fields of applied linguistics and SLA is fraught with disputes. In this article, I will first revisit the notion of the multilingual turn in order to show the contentious nature of the term, and then go on to suggest that we need to shy away from creating a division of labor between scholars from the global South and North, as has been propounded by Mendoza (2019); instead, we need to invest our efforts to ponder over more nuanced and situated actions which must be carried out by scholars from the global South to reform the above disciplines through “the praxis of decolonial fissure” (Walsh, 2018).

Keywords: *multilingual turn, applied linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, the praxis of decolonial fissure*

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarly debates over the term the multilingual turn in applied linguistics in general, and Second Language Acquisition (henceforth SLA) in particular reflect the robustness in these fields. May (2014), for example argues that in the context of Western applied linguistics the use of the term “multilingual turn” shows the lack of historicity of the field, as well as the applied linguists’ indifference with term. In SLA, May (2019) calls into question whether the promises of multilingual turn can be met and realized, so as to reform the field. Additionally, he argues that the English monolingual ideology, the balkanization of academic knowledge, and West-centered methodological nationalism still very much dominate SLA. In addressing to this problem, Mendoza (2019) contends that it is through a mutual division of labor between scholars in both the global North and South that the quandaries beleaguering the realization of the now much celebrated notion of multilingual turn in such a discipline as SLA¹ can be dealt with. Her main points can be encapsulated as below:

1. One’s geographic positionality and economic backdrops serve as a vital role for one’s ability to advance one’s scholarly knowledge in the global North.
2. There should be a synergy between theories, epistemologies, and methodologies and a scholar’s pursuit of economic capital. This synergy is made possible by building shared responsibilities between scholars hailing both from the global South and North.

While these are plausible arguments as far as modern critical theory of social sciences are concerned, they succumb to the “image mirroring”, an idea which perpetuates the dualistic structure of Western imagination (Sousa Santos, 2018). The peril of this mirror image lies in its ulterior motives

to feverishly promote “the exceptionalism of the Western world *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world...” (Sousa Santos, 2018: 5), thus tending to render linguistic epistemologies and the construction of knowledges in the latter world invisible, or even non-existent.²

In this brief article, I will first revisit the notion of the multilingual turn in order to show that the concerns expounded by May is mainly due to the contentious nature of the term itself, and then go on to suggest that we need to shy away from creating an unhelpful division of labor between scholars from the global South and North. The discussion will be more fruitful if we are willing to invest our efforts to ponder over more nuanced and situated actions that must be carried out by scholars from the perspective of the epistemologies of the South (Sousa Santos, 2018), so as to turn the promises of multilingual turn into a reality in both applied linguistics and SLA through what Catherine Walsh (2018) calls “the praxis of decolonial fissure.”

REVISITING THE MULTI LINGUAL TURN

Among the many creative neologisms ever created in applied linguistic scholarship (SLA included), the term “multilingual turn” is one which remains so contentious that it has attracted considerable attention of applied linguists. In fact, even scholars who favor the theoretical framework emanating from the notion of multilingual turn are themselves at loggerheads and have different conceptions of the term (see for example Kubota, 2016).

In a special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* entitled ‘Toward a multilingual approach in the study of multilingualism in school contexts’, McNamara (2011: 432) warns us for not assuming that ‘multilingualism in itself is simply a cause for celebration.’ As his observations in such countries as Africa and Europe have revealed, the monolingual ideology is still alive and kicking in the former, while in the latter country multilingualism is promoted only for speakers of majority languages, not for immigrants. Given this reality, Mcanamara calls for more critical understanding by examining monolingual ideologies. By the same token, Sugiharto (2015) acknowledges the prevalence of English language ideology in the teaching of English in formal education in multilingual and multiethnic Indonesia, but views the multilingual turn as a vacuous notion when it comes to the vibrancy of the convivial use of English in “low-stake linguistic practices” (e.g. street signage, artistic performances like plays, puppet shows, traditional songs, and social media conversation among youths) where English has been manipulated, repurposed and creatively localized to suit the communicative purposes of the people. Finally, in her critical appraisal of the use of what she terms “the multi/plural turn in applied linguistics”, Kubota (2016: 490) cautions us for not putting the term on the pedestal, critiquing its celebratory use for its “ideological complicities” and for “bolstering neoliberal discourses”. As she puts it:

It is clear that the multi/plural approaches are complicit in neoliberal multiculturalism in that both focus on the individual rather than group solidarity, assume color blindness, and support diversity...and that the multi/plural focus does not necessarily take into account how racial and other relations of power might affect the ways people use, learn, and teach language.

With these in mind, May’s concerns that “the *multilingual turn* has not fully delivered on its promises” are plausible one. However, in order to deal with these concerns, exhorting actions of division of labor between scholars from the global South and North will not really helpful to reform applied linguistics in general and SLA in particular. If the problems are, as Mendoza rearticulated, related to continuous focus on monolingualism rather than dynamic multilingualism, the lack of theorization of historicity in sociolinguistic research, the balkanization of academic knowledge, and Western-centered methodological nationalism, then what we need now are more nuanced and situated actions that must be carried out by scholars from the global South through what Catherine Walsh (2018) calls “the praxis of decolonial fissure.” This praxis is struggle-oriented in that it always seeks to discover “the possibilities of other modes of being, thinking, sensing, and living”, so as to

create cracks or fissures which become the potential site of one's "location, agency and everyday struggle" (Walsh, 2018: 80-81). To realize this praxis into concrete actions of struggle, I shall classify it into two forms of actions: first, creating a distance in relation to Western-centric epistemologies; second, exposing and enacting one's locus of enunciation. Each of these points is elucidated below.

RECONTEXTUALIZING THE STRUGGLE: TOWARD THE PRAXIS OF DECOLONIAL FISSURE

Creating a Distance in Relation to Western-centric Epistemologies

We need to realize that the points of concerns addressed by May are not limited solely to second language acquisition (SLA). In other sub-disciplines of applied linguistics such as second language writing, composition studies, literacy studies, studies on language policy, language testing, and educational linguistics, to mention just a few, we can witness how the English monolingual ideology, the balkanization of academic knowledge, and West-centered methodological nationalism still very much dominate these scholarships, posing an uphill battle to those scholars who wish to well-intentionally reform them under the framework of the multilingual turn. Yet, these are, not surprisingly, the "modern problems" – the problem of freedom, equality, and fraternity, "for which there are no modern solutions" (Sousa Santos, 2014: 44). This is to say, they are all the problems emanating from Western modernity which breeds Western-centric epistemologies.³

On the face of it, it is incumbent upon us to rethink a possibility of resolving the problems by creating a distance in relation to Western-centric epistemologies, rather than by creating actions for division of labor between scholars from the global South and North. The idea here is neither to devalue nor disparage the wealth of Western-centric traditions, but to "include it in a much broader landscape of epistemologies and political possibilities" and to give "special attention to the suppressed or marginalized smaller traditions within the big Western tradition" (Sousa Santos, 2014: 44). As Sousa Santos further points out:

The aim of creating distance in relation to the Eurocentric tradition is to open analytical space for realities that are "suprising" because they are new or have been ignored or made invisible, that is, deemed nonexistent by the Eurocentric critical tradition [quotation marks in original].

It is these "analytical space for realities" that enable those from the global South to interrogate the dominant Eurocentric thinking and knowledge, and eventually render their invisible or non-existent knowledges in the eyes of the global North visible and existent, as well as make other indigenous and ancestral experiences valid and credible ones. This clearly exemplifies more plausible actions of the priority of self-interest over knowledge advancement than those described by Mendoza previously. Equally important is that through this space we can detect other possible "peculiar" realities which are seen to go against what is normally conceived as global, universal, scientific, logical, and advanced realities.⁴

This certainly requires efforts on the parts of scholars to relinquish the dominant monolingual orientation inhabiting applied linguistics and SLA, and to poise to face "the work of imagination of finding an accurate imagery and a set of adequate theoretical metaphors that enables us to see this world more sharply" (Bloomaert, 2013: 621). While the dominant orientation tends to favor scientific and advanced realities as a pathway to academic knowledge advancement, the work of imagination values messy and chaotic realities, to which "well-tried structuralist and modernist benchmarks can no longer be profitably applied" (Bloomaert, 2013: 621). As Bloomaert (2013: 620) rightly points out:

The job ahead is to detect the different forms of order in this mess, to recognize the unfinished and evolving, tentative, non-linear aspects of social and cultural life not as peripheral and exceptional, but as *normal* features of life [italic in original].

This is obviously a judicious exhortation that scholars in applied linguistics and SLA must strive to pursue to address the lingering problems of the multilingual turn addressed by (May, 2019).

Exposing and Enacting the Locus of Enunciation

Creating a distance allows those scholars from the global South to expose and enact their locus of enunciation from their specific and situated positionalities. Grosfoguel (2007: 213) defines the locus of enunciation as “the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks.” As a form of the praxis of decolonial fissure, the exposing and enactment of the locus of enunciation can help open the cracks and extend the fissure of the domination of Western epistemological practices (Walsh, 2018). The benefit of opening and extending fissure is expressed by Gloria Anzaldúa as follow:

Las rajaduras [the cracks] give us a nepantla perspective, a view from the cracks...[that] enable us to reconfigure ourselves as subjects outside the us/them binary...to construct alternative roads, create new topographies and geographies...look at the world with new eyes, use competing systems of knowledge, and rewrite identities. Navigating the cracks is the process of reconstructing life anew (quoting from Walsh, 2018: 82-83) [words in brackets in original].

To illustrate an instance of how the praxis of crack opening and fissure extension, hence the enactment of the locus of enunciation, Walsh (2018: 84) narrated her own dissertation project from her specific location in Quito in 2001. The goal of the project is to demonstrate the disobedience and interruption of the prevalent Western domination framing the doctoral study in her locality in order to attain pluriversalism in the knowledge production, to build “interversality of interepistemic relation” and to make “evident one’s own place of engagement and enunciation.” This further suggests that one first needs to expose and act one’s locus of enunciation based on one’s relative positionality prior “to push a thinking from and with the social, political, cultural, epistemic, and life-based processes of struggle, movement, and change” (ibid).

In addition to this, bringing one’s locus of enunciation to the fore can help scholars in the global South situate their local histories and epistemologies, and shift the universality of white Eurocentric knowledge (Figueiredo & Martinez, 2019). Taking a case of a renowned scholar in the field of applied linguistics Ofelia Garcia, Figueiredo and Martinez (2019: 4) show the importance and relevance of the enactment of the locus of enunciation for the production of situated knowledge. Attending a plenary session delivered by Garcia at a Brazilian event on critical applied linguistics in Brasilia in 2019, one of these authors observed that Garcia’s “theory on translanguaging is not neutral or global, but rather localized in one particular place, with its own idiosyncrasies, and in the experience of one specific person – in this case, herself.” With this observation, Figueiredo and Martinez corroborates the claim that all knowledge production is always situated and localized.

Finally, the locus of enunciation can also be used as a resistant tactic to confront and decolonize dominant scholarly knowledge prevalent in academia (Sugiharto, 2020). Providing evidence from this enactment of resistant tactic from a specific enunciation –multiethnic and multilingual Indonesia, Sugiharto showcases an Indonesian-born scholar of Sundanese ethnicity Chaedar Alwasilah, who employed a resistant tactic by promoting locally produced knowledge to the international fora through such means as conferences, books and journal publications. Writing to the global audience from his specific locus of enunciation, Alwasilah aimed at both validating the vibrancy of his community’s

“ecology of knowledges” (Sousa Santos, 2018) and relocating academic knowledge by indexing his ethnicity.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have shown that the problems besetting the multilingual turn in SLA and in applied linguistics in general is due to the thorny nature of the term itself. The solution proposed here is concrete actions of struggle or, to be precise, the praxis of decolonial fissure which ought to be carried out by scholars hailing from the global South. Both distance creation from Western centric epistemologies and the enactment of locus of enunciation are not only viable, but also strategic actions of dealing with those problems of the multilingual turn highlighted by Mendoza, (2019). These actions, of course, require collective, concerted and strenuous efforts on the parts of the scholars from the global South, if the promises of the multilingual turn are to turn into reality. It seems to me that turning to a deaf ear on these actions, we will turn the celebrated idea of the multilingual turn in SLA and applied linguistics to a convenient abstraction, if not a convenient fiction.

NOTES

¹Throughout this article I mention SLA and applied linguistics simultaneously, as it has been argued that the former is sub-discipline of the latter (see Schmitt, 2010).

²From the perspective of the epistemologies of the South, Sousa Santos (2018) refers to the idea of invisible or non-existent knowledge as the “sociology of absences.”

³For Mignolo & Walsh (2018), the idea of Western modernity is inseparable with the notion of coloniality, because the latter is seen as constitutive of the former. Both of these two notions constitute what they call “the colonial matrix of power”, which can be countered by the “praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing and living.” (p.4).

⁴This space is akin to the idea of “border dwelling and thinking” (Mignolo, 2018, p. 206).

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