

Reconsidering Material Conditions in Language Politics: A Revised Agenda for Resistance

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Abstract

Focusing on resisting the hegemony of English or protecting vernaculars without addressing material inequalities is a misguided activity, as many scholars (including Hultgren 2020) have observed. Along those lines, applied linguists have recently argued that identity politics is ineffective without distributive justice (Block 2018); pedagogical changes without social structural changes (Flores 2013); or communicative, writing, and textual resistance without congenial institutionalized policies (Kubota 2014). These are important correctives for practitioners who might be too focused on making spaces for classroom and communicative changes in isolation from material and structural considerations. However, we have to also adopt a more complex orientation to material conditions and the way they relate to language inequalities when power finds more creative forms of control and expansion, as in the apparatuses of biopolitics in neoliberal conditions. I engage with Marxist orientations to language, especially perspectives on the base and superstructure, to deepen the materialist perspective on language politics. Though not all critical applied linguists are Marxists, we are indirectly influenced by Marxist orientations in our activist practice. Sometimes scholars adopt reductive versions of Marxism for polemical purposes, despite the complex debates that are going on. A revisit will help us develop a deeper orientation to language politics that addresses our contemporary challenges.

Keywords: new materialism; neoliberalism; rhizome; activism

1. Revisiting Materiality

The Marxist theory of language is sketchy and still under construction (Crowley 2018). Though the few incidental statements by Marx and Engels have been expanded by Voloshinov and Williams, in addition to Stalin's *Pravda* articles in the 1950s, there are still many issues of theory and practice that need discussion. Activist applied linguists are often influenced by simpler versions of the base and superstructure in making a case for addressing economic and institutional relations before addressing language inequality. From this perspective, social consciousness and other cultural domains, such as education and communication, would be treated as part of the superstructure that is

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determined by the underlying economic structures. In many circles, language too is treated as part of superstructure despite Stalin's 1950 caution not to do so. Stalin wrote:

QUESTION: Is it true that language is a superstructure on the base? ANSWER: No, it is not true ... In this respect language radically differs from the superstructure. Take, for example, Russian society and the Russian language. In the course of the past thirty years the old, capitalist base has been eliminated in Russia and a new, socialist base has been built. Correspondingly, the superstructure on the capitalist base has been eliminated and a new superstructure created corresponding to the socialist base. The old political, legal and other institutions, consequently, have been supplanted by new, socialist institutions. But in spite of this the Russian language has remained basically what it was before the October Revolution. (1950: 7)

While the dialectical materialism of Marxism was indeed a much-needed corrective to idealist discourses that treated human consciousness and thinking as shaping material reality, it has set up certain hierarchies and binaries that are not constructive. Though it is the dialectical relations and dynamic processes between the base and superstructure that are more important than the constructs themselves, some activist scholars still adopt the binary and prioritize the economic considerations in the base, overlooking their complex relations. Interactions between all domains are acknowledged, but the base is still treated as determinative, as we can infer from Holborow (2006). While acknowledging that "there is an interaction of all elements," she insists: "the social relations of production set limits to developments in the superstructure" (10).

Following this line of thinking, applied linguists have chosen to address certain economic and structural considerations as more important in educational and language change (see, for example, Flores 2013; Kubota 2014). Reflecting the base/superstructure distinction, some scholars separate the following constructs, giving more importance to the second construct in each pair as more determinative and generative of change: i.e., human agency/material conditions; classroom learning/socioeconomic forces; individual/social structure; and communicative practice/institutional policy. In fact, in some scholarly discourses, structural and material conditions are presented as overdetermined that we lack any spaces for resistance. Sometimes scholars also display a hubris that treats practitioners who work on changes in local contexts as misguided because they cannot see the

structural forces that constrain, appropriate, or compromise their resistance.

Recent rethinking on material conditions, from the perspective of Posthumanism (Coole and Frost 2010), Spatiality (Massy 2005), rhizomanalysis (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and actor network theory (Latour 2005), help us adopt a more complex orientation to material life and rethink the way semiotic resources, social networks, and material objects work together. I will label this approach *new materialism*. This perspective helps us value more diverse activist efforts in different social sites.

For Marxism, dialectical materialism relates to the way ownership of capital and means of production generate conflict, leading to social change. However, material life also includes objects and the natural environment. For Marxism, they are passive and lifeless. They are owned, manipulated, and exploited by people with capital. They are a means of production, leading to marketable commodities and generation of capital. Most activist scholars might treat nature as pliant in the hands of people for shaping, and dependent on representational systems such as language for meaning. Some might go along with Newtonian physics that nature is mechanical, and follows a predetermined routine. For them, understanding these laws of nature would help societies channel natural resources for human wellbeing.

However, there has been a rethinking of material conditions in the light of scientific advances. Theoretical physicists now consider material nature as vitalist and self-regulating (Barad 2007). When dialectical materialism posits conflict, complexity, and change in society, quantum physics sees these processes in material nature itself. This realization has made us question some of the traditional binaries such as human and nonhuman; representational versus material resources; and social and human sciences versus material sciences. Once material environment is treated as not dead but agentive and meaning-making, these traditional distinctions and hierarchies become questionable. This epistemological orientation is not new. It resonates with non-dualist and earth-centered thinking in indigenous philosophies (see Todd 2016 for native American communities, and Timalina 2014 for South Asian communities), including my heritage Tamil. These developments could help further materialize activist discourse and practice.

New materialism has generated epistemological shifts such as the following:

Flat ontology: rather than adopting binaries and hierarchies, scholars treat diverse resources as working together. Human and non-human beings and material objects mediate each other. We treat human beings as “mediants” (Appadurai 2015) rather than sovereign agents, who participate in the collective shaping work of all resources.

Rhizomatic trajectory: the relationship and progression of these resources in activities are non-linear, defying easy cause/effect relationships or closure. Change is ongoing, and can be initiated at different nodes in the network of social and material resources.

Distributed practice: meanings and action emerge from the collective activity of diversenetworks as an assemblage. We cannot attribute effects to an originary or placed source.

2. Revisiting Marxist Linguistics

These epistemological shifts have important implications for language. The biggest shift is that it counters the representationalism that has given language so much power. What representationalism means is that language encodes the knowledge and values that provide a blueprint for our life; language helps internalize these representations in our consciousness; these representations are essences, preceding and shaping sociomaterial practices; and language is housed in our mind, confirming the generative power of the mind in thinking and meaning-making. When we treat language as the superior medium to encode such representations, we also participate in a form of logocentrism, ignoring the many other material resources that have semiotic potential and generate meaning.

Marxism has a complicated history with these traditional linguistic orientations. It has opposed language as a matter of individual creativity as in the Chomskyan orientation (“individualist subjectivism”)¹ or impersonal system as in Saussurean structuralism (“abstract objectivism”)—see Voloshinov 1973: 45-63. It has materialized language as “practical consciousness,” which shapes and is shaped by

¹ Though Voloshinov wrote before Chomsky, his term suits some of the tendencies in Chomskyan linguistics very well.

social practice. Though language is perceived as interacting with base in dynamic ways, it is still located in superstructure and consciousness. Language is still a representational medium for encoding knowledge, consciousness, and ideologies, and cementing social relationships. Gal (1989) observes: “Although the definition of language as ‘practical consciousness’ has an impeccable pedigree in Marxist thought, most classical analyses had relegated language, along with other mental phenomena such as world-view, or ideology, to the realm of mere ‘superstructure,’ little more than a distorted reflection of the more important and determining political and especially economic processes of the ‘base’” (348). Furthermore, language holds a superior place in representational systems for Marxism. Arguing against gestures as a representational resource, Stalin (1950) argues: “Spoken language or the language of words has always been the sole language of human society capable of serving as an adequate means of intercourse between people” (34).

New materialism treats meanings and knowledge as non-representational (Thrift 2007), reducing the generative role of consciousness. That is, they emerge fully in activity. They are constructed through distributed practice among diverse social and material networks, with no construct or originary source for attribution. Even thinking is treated as generated at different sites in the body, and not emerging from the mind. Thinking and language are thus embodied. Such attributes as perception and affect play an equal role as reason in the emergence of such meaning and knowledge. New materialists would call this orientation to meaning as performative. For this understanding of knowledge and consciousness, a representational medium like language is not primary.

The materiality of language thus goes further than theorized in Marxist traditions and traditional Applied Linguistics. David Bleich (2013) borrowing from the Hebrew word “to speak,” which is *dbr* or *davar*, says that it literally means “to en thing”—or make ideas or experiences into “things.” This etymology is not far removed from our understanding of *embodiment*. If we think of language as embodying experiences, not only giving body to them but also embedded in material conditions in doing so, we can appreciate the materiality of language. We should also consider how language gains body as an artifact in texts and media. These language artifacts circulate like things, have agency like

other things, and mediate and shape the social and material networks through which they travel. Bleich further reflects on the performative side of language, considering languaging as an activity. To speak is to engage with the environment in reconfiguring material conditions. To some degree, this notion borrows from Austin's (1962) orientation in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin's title evokes the connotations of *dbr* as explained by Bleich. However, Austin's argument has also led to social constructionists treating language as agentive in making things, following dominant traditions of logocentrism and representationalism. Barad materializes performativity by arguing that meanings should be treated as generated in activity by material conditions, without primacy given to language. So, Barad argues: "A performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real" (2007: 132).

To consider how materialized language participates in power relationships in diverse assemblages of social institutions and material structures, we can consider Foucault's notion of the *dispositif*. Dispositif is a machinery, device, apparatus, or "formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function" (Foucault 1977: 194). Agamben (2009) lists what might go into the dispositif: "Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face" (14). As an object that embodies values and ideologies, language is also an apparatus

for effecting control. Language cannot be left out of coercive material resources in geopolitical relations. Furthermore, the dispositif integrates many of the binaries we considered earlier—including material and discursive resources—in the service of the powerful.

Language as a material agent is becoming even more important in neoliberal apparatuses of governmentality. It can play a subtle but powerful role in shaping subjectivities for control. Communication media, such as digital networks, function effectively in expanding the reach and productive role of capital in our times. Veteran Marxist and founding editor of *Race and Class*, Sivanandan, a compatriot from Sri Lanka, discerned the sign of the times before he passed away last year: “It is no longer the ownership of the means of production that is important, but the ownership of the means of communication. Not Britannia, but Murdoch, rules the waves” (1997: 288). Rita Raley (2004) theorizes this communicative apparatus as forming an “e-empire.” She treats them as an effective contemporary apparatus: “In order to speak to the Electronic Empire, the apparatus of our time, we need the figure of the network” (663). In functioning like a rhizome, the e-empire is powerful in its coercive and dominating capacity. These networks don’t have a central nation, institution, or person who can be traced for origin, locus, or control. Attacking one node doesn’t bring down the network. It has the capacity to proliferate into new material forms and reaching into the deepest geographical, social, and mental spaces in the service of capital, the market, and the powerful. Raley also discusses how English as a global language enjoys hegemony through these communicative apparatuses. The e-empire both enacts power and gains power, in what Raley considers performative: “Informational capitalism mutates not as an unavoidably communicable virus, but as a nonorganic, electronic network whose operative criterion is performativity. . . in that its very nature and truth is constituted by its performance and efficiency” (2004: 643). The fact that the e-empire is deterritorialized and works in participation with diverse material formations accounts for its power, as in the rhizomatic definitions of empire by Hardt and Negri (2000).

When we expand our orientation to material conditions through the new materialist perspective, we see how subtle and effective the machinations of power can be. Old metaphors of base/superstructure, or structuralist definitions of power, are inadequate to address this. While the powerful devise more subtle and creative ways of carrying out their

agendas, activist scholars might remain unimaginative and lethargic in sticking to traditional models of politics, overlooking new forms in which power is exercised. We have to identify more complex assemblages of power and devise more imaginative tactics for resistance. Raley critiques “the dominant articulation of capitalism within the Marxian tradition as unified, singular, and totalizing” (2004: 632). The fact that power is nonlinear, networked, open, proliferating, and distributed allows the powerful to manipulate others without visible machination. Not able to easily identify the sources and directions of power, people might be lulled into complacency. The recent events in United States and Europe, of democratic elections being manipulated through social media by a motley crew of state operatives, media celebrities, and teenage mischief makers, is just one example of how communication media as a rhizomatic assemblage can be exploited. Therefore, Raley proposes: “Reconceptualizing capitalism in terms of heterogeneity, fragmentation, and permeability, rather than organic unity, requires that we recognize noncapitalist economic practices, and it also allows for a more widely integrative notion of revolutionary praxis” (2004: 632).

The danger with such rhizomatic apparatuses is that they lead to inconspicuous “slow violence”—defined as “formless threats that are dispersed across space and time” (Nixon 2006-2007: 1). Though Nixon uses this metaphor to talk about the machinations of environmental destruction in the Anthropocene, which has drastic implications for the future of indigenous communities among others, we should expand this metaphor to other contemporary geopolitical processes. The subtle machinations of power in sustained and protracted “slow violence” are more effective and damaging than direct exploitation and dramatic military intervention, as in earlier forms of colonialism and imperialism. Nixon argues that they “pose formidable challenges for writers and activists alike. [. . .] In the gap between acts of slow violence and their delayed effects, both memory and causation readily fade from view and the casualties thus incurred pass unnoticed” (1).

3. New Strategies of Resistance

Though a rhizomatic orientation to power suggests its subtle effectiveness, it also reveals the possibilities for resistance. Since such

assemblages are multinodal, nonlinear, and lacking closure, there are spaces for human “mediants” to enter at multiple points for intervention. Though humans don’t have unqualified agency, Appadurai (2015) and other scholars have theorized how we might emplace ourselves strategically in these networks, and work in attunement with useful resources for change (Pigg 2014; Rickert 2013). It is this orientation to resistance that might affirm changes by less powerful people in everyday and local contexts of activism. Consider how the resources of e-empire were themselves used by ordinary people in other struggles such as Arab Spring against oppressive regimes to initiate change. They used the communication resources of social media, capitalizing on its networked resources for multipronged and spontaneous organization. Nixon demonstrates how community activists, like the Kenyan feminist Wangari Maathai, are able to adopt creative forms of resistance that are multipronged and collective against the powerful. In fact, for this form of resistance, large-scale institutions and traditional organizations of activism might not be nimble and creative.

Maathai’s Green Belt movement brings together the concerns of women, indigenous communities, and environment against political authoritarianism, in what Nixon (2006-2007) calls “intersectional environmentalism” (527). Maathai’s mobilization of women to plant trees was vilified as “conflict resolution lite” (527) by some activist circles. However, Nixon demonstrates why it was very threatening to the authoritarian regime: “What distinguished the Green Belt Movement’s approach was the way that, in protesting deforestation, they went beyond the standard strategies of civil disobedience (sit ins, tree hugging, or chaining themselves to trees), turning instead to active reforestation as the symbolic vehicle for their civil disobedience” (521). These unconventional forms of activism that draw from diverse symbolic and material resources and intersectional identities relates to what Raley refers to above as an “integrative notion of revolutionary praxis.”

The more diverse the modes and channels of resistance, the more effective they are against new forms of power. From this point of view, teachers who are focused on the implications of their pedagogical activism for institutional and material change will certainly have a role to play. The work they do shouldn’t be downplayed by the false binaries which separate the classroom from society, individuals from institution, and language from material conditions.

4. A Classroom Example of Language Activism

I conclude these theoretical reflections on materiality with a simple example on the possibilities in rhizomatic and multinodal resistance. This is the story of a Tibetan student who came to my university as a Master's degree student in TESOL. She suggested her heritage name Bendi Tso for this article and asked that I avoid her Chinese legal name. When I first met Bendi in a welcome gathering for new students, she was apprehensive of introducing herself as Tibetan. She gave everyone her Chinese name. Later, when I accidentally found that she was from Tibet and engaged her excitedly in conversations about the politics there, she advised me to keep her identity confidential. As she was in the company of Chinese students, in a Master's degree program with a large number of Chinese students, she felt uncomfortable revealing that identity. In fact, because of her education in China and her Chinese name, others were not aware of her Tibetan identity. I left her with the assurance that I was very familiar with the struggle of the Tibetans for autonomy, sympathized with them as I myself came from the Sri Lankan Tamil community that had waged a disastrous 30 year military struggle for a separate state, and that she should consider the American university campus as providing some spaces for relatively uncensored thinking and conversation.

A few semesters later, Bendi attended one of my courses on teaching second language writing, where composing a literacy narrative was one of the course activities. Though she wrote her initial drafts about her Chinese background, gradually she included references to her Tibetan early life, and Tibetan literacy through the epics and religious texts narrated to her by her grandmother. These revisions could have been motivated by the explicitly identarian politics and translanguaging dispositions informing the course. The course readings encouraged engagement with students' multilingual identities, semiotic repertoires, and diversity in voice. As other students narrated their own multilingual backgrounds, and Bendi engaged with their writing in peer review, she felt comfortable including references to her own Tibetan literacy.

In later versions of the narrative (which you can read in Tso 2019), Bendi went on to narrate how this pedagogical exercise motivated her to locate Tibetan epics in the university library. She initially read some of these stories in English translation. These texts didn't resonate at the affective level for her. They didn't embody the cosmology and ecology

her grandmother had constructed in her childhood. She then contacted a friend in another university to obtain some of these texts in the original Tibetan. However, now she realized that she couldn't read them in the original language. Having moved to Mandarin-dominant schools for secondary education and English thereafter, she was shocked to realize she had lost her proficiency in her heritage language. She concluded her literacy narrative with the desire to be reconnected with her heritage, lovingly evoking the visions for co-existence and cosmopolitanism she had inherited from Dalai Lama and indigenous traditions.

Bendi's writing was performative. It constructed a new identity, a critical consciousness, and far-reaching changes in her educational trajectory. As she proceeded with her studies, something motivated her to choose the maintenance of Tibetan in her own village of Luo zu for her thesis research. One summer, she borrowed the instruments I had devised for studying the maintenance of Tamil as heritage language in the Sri Lankan diaspora, obtained IRB approval for human subject participation, and headed back to Tibet. She came back with depressing results on how families and children were shifting to Mandarin and English under their dual hegemony. She didn't find much hope for reversing the language shift, as the economic and political conditions were not in favor of Tibetan language. She wrote an impressive but sad master's thesis on the conditions leading to the loss of Tibetan in her village and, more broadly, in her homeland.

The story doesn't end there. Though she had initially joined the master's program as a prospective English teacher, she dramatically shifted course. She developed an interest in doing activist anthropology. As she visited my office to discuss applications for doctoral studies and asked me to write reference letters, she expressed her interest in doing critical ethnographic work on community and cultural development in Tibet. She gained admission to a suitable doctoral program in anthropology in a leading university, where she could merge her academic and activist interests. She is now focused on developing economic and social infrastructure that values Tibetan, while raising people's awareness, solidarity, and collective action through her own fieldwork and interviews in Tibetan villages. She sees promise in the informal economy and community institutions that function as parallel religious structures, subverting the official Chinese political institutions, to develop her heritage language and culture. She has adopted her less

known Tibetan name, because she was aware that her legal Chinese name will get her in trouble with the authorities for the work she is doing. She is committed to merging risky activist work with a doctoral degree.

Bendi hasn't succeeded in mobilizing her neighbors to chase the Chinese soldiers or resist the lures of global English from her village. She hasn't succeeded in establishing the subversive or parallel economic and social infrastructures for preserving the vitality of Tibetan. But she has joined the hidden, embedded, affective, and multipronged "slow resistance" (to parallel Nixon's term) that has been going on in her homeland for several generations. The very research process has ignited critical thinking and resistant collaboration among her research participants. I don't know how this activism evolved for this demure student within a matter of two years of associating herself with a Sri Lankan instructor and a motley group of students and scholars in a Master's program in an American university in Happy Valley. I don't know if the literacy narrative she wrote in English initiated changes in her thinking or simply entextualized changes she was already going through in slow and hidden ways through her whole life. Did the classroom set in motion forays into villages dominated by globalizing languages? Did identity politics lead her to address distributive justice? All that I know is that political activism and literacy development meshed for her in unpredictable and slow ways in the context of an assemblage of semiotic and ecological resources.

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