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POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY IN CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT

Critical applied linguistics (CALx) challenges the theory, politics, and practice of applied linguistics. Early work in the field was inspired by the Frankfurt School of Critical theorists, focusing on neo-Marxian concerns of power, inequality, and emancipation within language learning and translation; additional research drew on insights from Feminism and postcolonialism literature. In recent years, the concerns raised by scholars working within CALx have entered the mainstream. They underlie, for example, critiques of native-speaker norms within work on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), the move to include more diverse representations of Englishes and English users within textbooks, and revisions to hiring practices to favor non-native practitioners. This paper explores the utility of adopting a critical perspective explicitly rejected by Alastair Pennycook in his foundational monograph on CALx, namely a small-c critical approach based on (to use Pennycook's terminology) a liberal, humanist foundation. A selection of representative CALx positions is presented for analysis. In response to each example, critical questions are posed. For example: While the promotion of non-native Englishes may be understood to challenge 'linguistic Imperialism', are language learners themselves—who are less likely than theorists to be 'enlightened' by a neo-Marxian understanding of the world—likely to be in favor of such a movement, or to have a voice within it? The results of the analysis suggest that the unintended consequences of CALx-inspired change may in some cases oppress rather than emancipate. The discussion section situates the CALx movement with reference to the spread of neo-Marxian perspectives into Academia and educational policy. It is argued that critical work in Applied linguistics would benefit from greater viewpoint diversity, that is, the incorporation of a wider range of methodological perspectives.

Keywords: Critical applied linguistics, CALx, English as a lingua franca, ELF

A Note on Terminology

The 'critical' in critical applied linguistics is synonymous with neo-Marxist (or post-modern, post-structural etc.), in effect camouflaging the field's ideological commitment to a single political agenda. For this reason, quotation marks are used to distinguish the ideological use of the term from general usage, which is understood to refer to the judicious exploration of the status quo from various epistemological or political standpoints. The abbreviation (C)AL is used instead of CALx.

Introduction

How comes it then that they prove so much stronger than you? Because they speak from the fullness of the heart—their low, corrupt views are their real convictions:

whereas your fine sentiments are but from the lips, outwards; that is why they are so nerveless and dead. It turns one's stomach to listen to your exhortations, and hear of your miserable Virtue, that you prate of up and down. Thus it is that the Vulgar prove too strong for you (The Golden Sayings of Epictetus, XCIX).

The purported mission of ‘critical’ applied linguistics (hereafter (C)AL) is to hold applied linguistics politically accountable by addressing ethical issues within language education, translation, and policy, and institutional, bureaucratic, corporate, and political discourse. Central concerns of (C)AL include the unequal distribution of power, and unfair access to real and symbolic resources. The (C)AL outlook is inherited from the Frankfurt school of ‘critical’ theorists which took root in university literature departments in the 1970s before spreading to the humanities. Today, despite the parochial scope of its outlook, limited principally to the operation of power through discourses, neo-Marxist theory has acquired a remarkable degree of power within the academy and beyond (Windschuttle, 2018). According to Paglia (2017), the original movement professed leftist values, yet had little connection to ordinary people, “who were condescended to and excluded by the theorists’ elitist jargon” (p. 111). It is argued here that the (C)AL activism similarly lacks a connection with those on whose behalf it purports to fight. Chief among the French critical theorists was Foucault, a “glib game-player who took very little research a very long way,” (or a ‘discouraging wit’ in Baconian terms) and who was especially attractive to “academics looking for a shortcut to understanding world history, anthropology, and political economy” (ibid, p. 80). Foucault’s belligerent leftism was, according to Scruton (2015), not a criticism of reality, “but a defense against it, a refusal to recognize that, for all its defects, normality is all we have” (p. 113). Recent manifestations of critical theory include postmodern, poststructuralist, feminist, and ‘queer’ theory. The (C)AL literature draws upon them all.

Critiquing neo-Marxist approaches in terms of truth is a thankless task, since those who (disingenuously) profess to reject notions of objectivity and human nature are immune to refutation. Pennycook (2001) may be correct in a technical sense when he states that attacks on the field suggest poor understanding of critical theory, but the more important point made here is that work within (C)AL exhibits little understanding of *anything except* critical theory. Disapproval of the (C)AL movement is also rejected (to take one such example) as an expression of “Western, white male, class-privileged arrogance” (Lather, 1992, p. 100). It is worth pointing out that many of the leading voices within (C)AL are white, Western, and male.

Widdowson (2001) writes that (C)AL perspectives are “revealing precisely because they are partial, informed by a particular perspective” (p. 5). It does not follow, however, that this perspective alone is “capable of revealing ideological bias which is insinuated into the minds of uninformed readers without them being aware” (ibid.):

Critical people, like missionaries, seem to be fairly confident that they have identified what is good for other people on the basis of their own beliefs. But in making a virtue of the necessity of partiality we in effect deny plurality and impose our own version of reality, thereby exercising the power of authority which we claim to deplore (Widdowson, 2001, p. 15).

Since internal inconsistency of the type identified by Widdowson is more easily identified and debated than matters of truth, several hypocrisies are addressed in this paper: Why do (C)AL activists stress the importance of theory being ‘historically situated’ while exhibiting little knowledge of history beyond de rigueur critiques of Western Imperialism?; Why do they eschew reductionism while engaging in an extreme form of it?; And why do they claim skepticism of universal truths while maintaining an unshakable faith in the perennial leftist talismans such as *inequality*, *emancipation*, and

diversity? In order to address these questions, the first section of this paper examines elements *missing* from the (C)AL worldview. The second introduces a contrasting account of politics and power based on the work of James Burnham. Burnham agrees with many of the Marxists' diagnoses of what ails society, but to him the cause of this suffering is far more straightforward—in short, human nature. Unlike work within (C)AL, the theories upon which Burnham draws are grounded in a broad survey of human history, they are plainly stated, they acknowledge both the evils *and* the goods of society, and they show the dangers of ideological utopianism. A free society, they maintain, is by its very nature conflicted and unequal.

(C)AL: A Revealing but Insufficient Worldview

The theory in (C)AL can be hard to detect, but the following tenets are reliably present in the literature:

Language is primarily a form of social practice, constructing and reflecting social relations. It should therefore be studied as such.

The exercise of power, or politics, and the role played by language in the exercise of power, is the key to understanding applied linguistics practice.

Reductionist explanations, claims of impartiality, and theories drawing on human nature are to be treated as pretenses of objectivity.

Research should be politically motivated, fighting on behalf of the underdog for change, equality, gender equity, diversity, and inclusion. It must oppose racism, neoliberalism, and European rationalism.

The first three of these tenets are rendered more or less agreeable to all by discreetly inserting into them the qualifier ‘to an extent’. Few would argue that some forms of inequality are undesirable, that myths and narratives shape our societies, that scholars should be skeptical towards received truths, and that politics and power are vital to an understanding of society and its institutions, applied linguistics included—the problems Marx identified were by no means imaginary. Viewing applied linguistics *solely* in terms of language and power results, however, in an impoverished account of the field.

Language use and language learning undoubtedly constitute a form of social practice, but language is not all there is to social practice, and social practice is not all there is to language. Language can be understood as a rules-based communication system consisting of lexis and grammar, represented symbolically or even ‘hard-wired’ in the brain; it is also a means of carrying out numerous communicative functions; Perhaps most importantly, its investigation is key to an understanding of consciousness and cognition. While it may be possible to insert politics into investigations of these areas, it is generally unhelpful to do so.

While language can indeed be used to exert “power and dominance, cultural hegemony, and ideological control” (Iyer et al., 2014, p. 324), so can laws, the military, guns, the media, and schooling. (C)AL activists may argue that language cuts through all these areas, but then again so do economics, history, and atoms. Since *everything* is connected, it falls to the judicious researcher to reduce the scope of his investigation to a focus on salient aspects while acknowledging the limitations inherent in a particular scope. Pennycook’s (2001) claim that the examination of language in terms of cognition has *greatly hindered* the understanding of language learning, and his call instead for “...a politicized view of language, a commitment to academic work that puts its politics foremost” (p. 82, emphasis added) is special pleading for a particular, ideological form of reductionism, as is his assertion that “there is no position outside power and no position from which one can arrive at the truth outside relations of power” (pp. 90–1). Politics, in the sense of the exercise of power, is peripheral rather than central to love, friendship,

children's play, the arts, altruism, filial piety, religious faith, the scientific method, the appreciation of beauty, literature, art, music, film, and many other important realms of life. Crucially, the same is true of how language is used within such realms.

The view within (C)AL that power is inherently sinister leads to overly simplistic prescriptions. Take, for example, the statement: "If...we acknowledge that men are powerful in relation to women, we need to ask how this operates, how it came to be, *and what strategies should be adopted to oppose it*" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 28, emphasis added). This begs a number of questions: What type of power (physical? economic? erotic?) is referred to? To what extent are power imbalances inevitable? Men do not need to take time off work for the birth and nurture of newborns, and will therefore, everything else being equal, out-earn women: common sense, not a conspiracy theory, explains such differentials in economic power. If women had more power than men, would the 'critical' theorists switch sides? Scruton's (2015) observations on the concept of liberation raises similar doubts about the simplistic use of such concepts, as well as reminding us that power is about more than language alone:

If liberation involves the liberation of the individual potential, how do we stop the ambitious, the energetic, the intelligent, the good-looking and the strong from getting ahead, and what should we allow ourselves by way of constraining them? Best not to confront that impossible question (Scruton, 2015, p. 4)

A further consequence of the rote 'critical' view of power is the presumption of bad faith on the part of those who have more of it than others (and innocence on the part of those who do not). Thus, translation within an Imperial context is *simply* about justifying colonial domination (Niranjana, 1992); native English teachers are guilty *en masse* of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006); Western products of the enlightenment such as constitutional government, the separation of church and state, individual liberty, and towering achievements in high art and music—all of these are damned by the fact that they occurred contemporaneously with Western imperialism. In the (C)AL literature one is unlikely to encounter even grudging appreciation for the role of Western science and medicine in greatly improving the material quality of life, especially for women.

(C)AL activists ask how we ever came to swallow "ideas such as human agency, human nature or universalism" (Pennycook, 2018, p. 5). The answer of course is that there is mass of empirical evidence attesting to their existence. Anthropologists have identified hundreds of universals across societies, such as incest avoidance, territoriality, fear of death, rituals, childcare, pretend play and mourning (Brown, 1991). Human organization into groups such as families, tribes, cities, nations, empires, religions and economic classes can be observed in all societies. Such organizations are, Burnham (1943) reminds us:

...part of the very conditions of social existence. There will be no escape from them no matter what alterations occur in economic or political structure; all attainable social goals, good or evil, will lie within the limits set by them (p. 137).

The existence of universals such as these, combined with individual differences in ability and motivation, renders fantastical the dream of a society that is both equal *and* just. Yet this dream is precisely the ideology of the 'critical' and (C)AL movements, and so in their work reality and empirical enquiry must yield to ideology and cant. By doing so, tactics are required to obfuscate the absence of any clear-cut theory or concrete conclusions. Chief among these is the use of deliberately convoluted, labyrinthine language—a glitzy, game-playing style of intellectual discourse (Paglia, 2017). Explicit excuses typically center on the idea that to alight on truths would not be critical, and critical work by definition therefore cannot be expected to do so (Quantz, 1992), or that constant disagreement between scholars is the only way to be productive (Kincheloe &

McClaren, 2000). For the ‘critical’ theorist, being critical is the end, not the means, of enquiry.

A final element missing from the (C)AL worldview is a deep view of history. Pennycook argues that “[a]ny model of a relation between language and society will only be as good as one’s understanding of society” (2001, p. 50), but the view of history and society within the (C)AL world is limited to language, power and inequality within a certain geographic slice of recent history. It is therefore bereft of science, history, anthropology, literature, art, economics, literature psychology and sociology. Paglia (2017) suggests that feminists should be trained in all these areas before being let loose on undergraduates. The problem (arguably) with this suggestion is that there would be few academics left. A middle road suggestion would be to ensure that the critical wing of any field collectively showcase a diverse range of perspectives, and for there to be discussion between these scholars holding widely different views. With this in mind, the following section introduces for comparison with the (C)AL literature, a realist account of the role of power and language.

James Burnham’s The Machiavellians

James Burnham was a prominent Trotskyist in the 1930s before abandoning Marxism and becoming a public intellectual of the American right. Rather than socialism, he saw an exploitative *managerial state* as the likely devolutionary endpoint of capitalism (modern, popular manifestations of this managerial class include the bureaucracy, the military industrial complex, the crony capitalists, and most recently the deep state). In his 1943 book *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*, Burnham explicates his theory by drawing on the work of five European thinkers—Machiavelli, Mosca, Sorel, Michels, and Pareto. Burnham’s synthesis of their thoughts is presented in the following tenets:

An objective science of politics, and of society, comparable in its methods to the other empirical sciences, is possible through the close study of history. Social science also has a role to play. Its valuable contributions include statistical conclusions derived from studies of mortality, diseases, suicide, crime, literacy, and trade.

The primary subject matter of political science is the struggle for social power.

The laws of political life cannot be discovered by an analysis which takes men’s words and beliefs, spoken or written, at their face value.

For an understanding of the social process, the most significant social division to be recognized is that between the ruling class and the ruled. Historical and political science is above all the study of the elite, its composition, and its structure

The primary object of every elite, or ruling class, is to maintain its own position. This is done through force and fraud.

The strength of the Marxist view, according to Burnham (and, by analogy, the strength of the (C)AL movement) is its “minute, pointed, merciless criticism of our present organization of society” (p. 286). He claims that it failed, however, to demonstrate the possibility of eliminating economic inequality or organizing a classless society. Human nature simply does not allow for it (see above).

By applying Burnham’s principles to applied linguistics, a number of interesting comparisons can be made with (C)AL tenets. Rather than language constructing power, Burnham’s view is that the majority of language consists of *formal* rather than *real* meanings. Formal meanings are supernatural or metaphysical-transcendental, and say little direct about real actions in the real world. Because of this, a systematic distortion of truth is the rule rather than the exception in political discourse. For example:

We believe we are disputing the merits of a balanced budget and a sound currency when the real conflict is deciding what group shall regulate the distribution of the

currency. We imagine we are arguing over the moral and legal status of the principle of the freedom of the seas when the real question is who is to control the seas (Burnham, 1943, p. 24).

Scruton (2015) makes a similar distinction between language that describes reality and that used to *assert power over it*. According to Burnham, programs, theories and philosophies “must be related to the whole complex of social facts in order to understand their real political and historical meaning” (p. 224). These social facts do exist, and the best way they can hope to be derived is through the close study of the history. One such fact, observable in all societies throughout history regardless of political system, is the existence of a minority elite ruling over a majority non-elite. Others include social hierarchy, inequality, and tribalism.

Pennycook (2001) cautions against “tossing around terms such as *oppression, inequality, imperialism, racism, ideology*, and so forth without a clear understanding of how such terms invoke different understandings of the world” (p. 26) (note, Pennycook does not insist upon *defining* them). The prominent applied linguist Henry Widdowson (2001) notes that while few would argue against equality, freedom, and human rights, the difficulty is that people interpret such principles as they wish to suit their own circumstances. Burnham, by contrast, takes the stronger view that many of these concepts are formal, not real. Freedom from want, he writes: “is very nearly as meaningless, in terms of real politics, as eternal salvation: men are wanting beings; they are freed from want only by death” (p. 26). Freedom itself is a term without content. There can only be freedom only “from certain things or for certain things, which always involves restrictions in other specific respects” (p. 176). The massacre of the French revolution was carried out for the purposes of liberty and equality for all, yet “No two men are or can be equal in all things; all are equal in some” (*ibid.*). Pacifist and anti-war movements may bring about situations “in which many more men have been killed than would have been if political policy had based itself on the fact that wars are a natural phase of the historical process” (p. 131). Claiming to be against violence, or inequality, or in favor expression of humanitarian ideals, Burnham argues, does not mean that there will be more of these things in the world. He compares the intent of sincere humanitarians towards society to that of a child who intends to do good to a bird by fondling it—to death.

Burnham’s warns against quick, apparently rational solutions to long-standing human problems. History tells us that measures providing for the strength of the community in the distant future diminish the satisfactions of the existing generation, and that in every community members are called to observe—through social approval, education, or physical force—prevailing norms embodied in customs, traditions, laws, and religions. Regardless of the ‘truth’ of these norms, he observes:

...it contributes to social welfare...to have people believe that their own individual happiness is bound up with acceptance of the community standards: or, as moral philosophers put it, that there is a direct correspondence between the welfare of the individual and the welfare of society (p. 201).

Burnham rejects the rationalistic dream that if men knew the truth about social and political life, society would automatically be transformed for the better. Sometimes the truth helps, but at other times:

...it may weaken or destroy sentiments, habits, attitudes upon which the integrity of social life, above all in times of crisis, may depend. False beliefs do sometimes produce evil social results; but they often, also, benefit the community (p. 202).

A society in which myths were eliminated in favor of scientific rationalism would, according to Burnham, have little in common with human societies as we know them. It is no more than an imaginary fantasy.

What Burnham does consider to be within the grasp of society is liberty: not the liberty of a misconceived utopia, but the liberty to be found throughout history in some societies more so than others. This type of freedom is found in democracies that protect property rights, juridical defense, freedom of religion, a free press, and a measure of security for its members. Most important, according to Burnham, is “the right of opposition, the right of opponents of the currently governing Elite to express publicly their opposition views and to organize to implement those views” (p. 244). This type of liberty is not a product of unity and harmony, but rather a product of conflict and difference. The danger of idealists who claim that the good society will be achieved by the absolute triumph of their doctrine is clear. History shows that their triumph can only lead to tyranny.

Machiavellian Applied Linguistics?

Applying Burnham’s theory to applied linguistics is a little unfair, as Burnham was judicious in limiting his focus to politics alone. It is offered here merely for heuristic purposes. If we view applied linguistics in terms of the exercise of power, what might Burnham’s worldview predict for its future?

First, power, hierarchies and inequality will continue to be social facts within applied linguistics. Education authorities, tenured professors, and classroom teachers will continue, linguistically speaking, to rule, and students and newly arrived immigrants will continue to be ruled. In a healthy, democratic applied linguistics, some of the formerly ‘disempowered’ will become ‘empowered’ but whatever happens, the elite, in one form or another, will persevere.

Teachers will continue to hold stereotypes about their students that will not apply fairly to individual students. In education systems in which students are allowed the liberty to object to what they perceive to be unfair stereotyping, their resistance will demand attention and reform. Language learners and teachers will continue to view the ‘other’ as exotic, because it is their nature to do so (besides, if they did not, much of the motivation to learn foreign languages would disappear). Students will continue to seek native-speaker models, since that is what they have always done. Applied linguistics will continue to be entwined in national curricula with efforts to instill patriotism and respect for tradition, because these are necessary myths of statehood.

Students can be empowered to an extent, but since humans are hierarchical creatures they will object to too much freedom—it is, after all, the teacher’s job to teach. Within research, ‘empowerment frameworks’ designed “to give power to those who inhabit the sociocultural field of a research project, by negotiating outcomes so that everyone’s needs are met” (Corson, 1997, p. 182) will continue to serve primarily to make researchers feel good about themselves.

The emancipation that (C)AL activists envisage being brought about “as a result of awareness of the operations of ideology” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 42) will be as likely to do harm as good. Liberal approaches to schooling will continue to “construct education as a neutral context of knowledge transaction in which everyone has a chance to succeed” (Pennycook, 2001, p. 165) because this is a myth that serves the greater good.

Finally, let us address the assumption within (C)ALL that it fights for the oppressed. Pennycook dismisses Honey’s contention that lack of Standard English holds back blacks not on the basis of whether he is incorrect, but because his notions are *problematic*. Yet blacks themselves would likely agree that they are more likely to get along by ‘speaking white’, and any Japanese university student can tell you that they speak dialectal versions of Japanese in a job interview at their peril. The *commendable*, nonjudgmental view (Pennycook, 2001) that all dialects are equal will continue to be

pushed by intellectuals with no skin in the game, but these formal proclamations will have little influence on how those beneath the ivory tower understand the world and operate within it.

Burnham observes that the principles he identifies in the work of the Machiavellians are much closer to the instinctive views of practical men than to those of theorists, activists and philosophers. This is because they are “simply the generalized statement of what practical men do and have been doing” (p. 227). This is not to say that the managerial state, of which influential figures in applied linguistics are a part, cannot do a great deal of damage by demanding that schools and universities play along with their formal understandings of society, should they have the power to do so.

How free is applied linguistics? In a free society envisioned by Burnham, people have the freedom to express their opinions without fear of retribution. The same must be true of the classroom, language policy, and publishing within applied linguistics. A free applied linguistics is one with viewpoint diversity, in which scholars are free to approach problems from diverse political standpoints. The extreme tendency towards leftism in academia, of which the triumph of the Frankfurt school is a striking example, must therefore be considered part of the problem, and the same applies to the (C)ALL movement as long as its ideas retain monopoly power within the so-called critical wing of the field.

In Closing

Widdowson (2001) writes that:

We need...to avoid politically correct, self-righteous posturing and the easy appeal to populism. We need to stop disclaiming proper authority, all the better to exercise it improperly by persuasion. We need, as Dr. Johnson advised, to clear our mind of cant, and to be critical about our claims and pretensions. We need, in short, a critical, not a *hypocritical*, applied linguistics to take us into the future (Widdowson, 2001, p. 16, emphasis added).

In this paper I hope to have shown that a healthy applied linguistics should welcome multiple political viewpoints, including neo-Marxist perspectives. However, even an enriched manifestation of criticism of the type called for here must remain a niche subfield. The bulk of work within the field must continue, imperfectly, to attempt to fulfill its mission as an objective field of inquiry, even if their objectivity is to a degree mythical. The over-imposition of a critical oversight committee would mean tyranny and misery for all involved. Besides, if applied linguists spent all their time “coming to terms with the political and ideological nature of the discipline” (Kabel, 2009, 12) they would have no time left to do applied linguistics.

Finally, it is worth remembering that debates of this sort are by nature an elite preoccupation. As Burnham observes in his monograph:

It is ludicrous for the authors of books like this one--that is, serious books about society—to pretend to speak to “the people.” The great bulk of the people in this country neither buys nor reads any books at all, thereby avoiding a great quantity of nonsense. The potential audience for this sort of book is...limited to a comparatively small section of the Elite (p. 262).

The acknowledgement that applied linguistics scholars are themselves part of the elite, and that their arguments are principally a form of intellectual jousting for position and promotion, often detached from the lives and struggles of the numerically superior ‘ruled’, is perhaps the most important of all.

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