

Southern Multilingualisms and Diversities

Background and early conceptualisation of this consortium

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The idea of a network of scholars and research groupings concerned with multilingualism in southern contexts is a response to recent interest in linguistic diversity. It is also in response to literature that offers accounts, theories and understandings of diverse linguistic practices as if these were portable across contexts (e.g., from north to south, from west to east, from centre to periphery etc.).

This interest includes a historical understanding of the ways in which discourses of multilingualism have been circulating in Africa, Asia and Latin America over the past century or more. It includes an interest in how these ideas have travelled to and been appropriated into northern debates and then returned, somewhat reconfigured, to southern contexts.

The impact of late twentieth century globalisation, large-scale displacement and / or mobility of people and a reconfiguration of the European nation-state ideology in the emergence of the European Union, appear to have altered mainstream perceptions of diversity in North America and Europe. Apparently unprecedented and recent heterogeneity has reanimated much earlier European considerations of diversity that go back as far as Plato's *Republic*. Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, heterogeneity has continued to be contested, investigated, practised, knitted into local epistemologies and theorised. For some time there has been a growing sense of astonishment amongst linguists and scholars who work with multilingualism and linguistic diversity in Latin America, Asia and Africa, about the ways in which knowledge of and expertise in multilingualism have recently come to be portrayed as emerging from recent theorisation in the metropolitan centres of North America and Europe. This astonishment is amplified when familiar discourses of multilingualism are returned to southern contexts, recast as northern theory. This may come with a risk that diverse local understandings and conceptualisations of diversity 'on the ground' become hidden in the categories and taxonomies of a colonial ordering of reality.¹ It is within this ordering of reality that much theory from the north appears to remain shackled.

Countries of the south, almost by definition, are characterised by a high degree of diversity in terms of language, culture, faith, geographic setting and spatial mobility. Whereas matters of diversity in the north may have been subsumed under various regimes of nationalism and notions of the nation-state from the late eighteenth to late twentieth century, attempts to constrain diversity by such means in the south during colonial rule have not been particularly successful.

Systems based on the nation-state, inflexible borders and homogeneity in the north are under strain as borders become increasingly porous. This has created stress on administrative systems, not least of which is education. New translocal technologies, global economies and contemporary changes in

¹ A case in point is how multilingualism continues to be conceptualised mainly as a restricted idea of 'language' (as multiple monolingualisms, portfolios or repertoires) rather than in a broader sense of multivocality, which could accommodate other forms of signs and meaning.

the mobility of peoples have intensified debates in the north so that institutions might understand and adjust to new diversities.

Debates in the south, however, have other points of departure. Here, diversity has always appeared to be the de facto state of affairs. Colonial templates of homogeneity have not sat easily upon many countries of Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Whereas regional conflict and displacement of people may appear from a northern perspective to signify disruptions arising from diversity, southern analyses show that the seeds of conflict, for example, in Rwanda in the 1990s, lie elsewhere. Local and regional systems of southern nations accommodate diversity in different ways, having centuries of expertise in both the management and mismanagement of heterogeneity.

Discussions in early 2012 between researchers in the Research Centre for Languages and Cultures (RCLC), University of South Australia and the Centre for Multilingualism and Diversities Research (CMDR), University of the Western Cape, led to a symposium at the World Congress of International Applied Linguistics' Association (AILA) 2014 in Brisbane. The purpose of the symposium, 'Theorising Multilingualism and Diversity in, of and from the South', was to gauge the appetite for a network of scholars and research centres or groupings that would explore perspectives of multilingualism arising in southern settings. The AILA Symposium was followed by a Roundtable Meeting hosted by the RCLC and CMDR. This meeting was held at the University of South Australia on 20 August 2014.

At the meeting, some participants expressed concern about the choice of the term 'Southern' in the name of the consortium, indicating that this might be understood to be exclusionary. Our intention in choosing 'Southern' was to tap into the theoretical traction evoked by the term in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies in discussions the span both northern and southern contexts. University of Sydney based scholar, Raewyn Connell, advanced the notion of 'Southern Theory' in a seminal work (Connell 2007). This has been followed by the anthropologists, John and Jean Comaroff whose work focuses on 'southern epistemologies' (2012). It has been a long-standing point of departure in the linguistic and educational work of Lynn Mario de Souza in Brazil, and in the work of sociologist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, in Europe and much of Latin America. Related epistemological discussions are similarly emerging in the Indian sub-continent and China, at a time when the economic balance of global power has already tipped in favour of the global south. The notion of 'decoloniality' offered by Mignolo (2011) is also part of a larger southern agenda. Thus, we see southern theory or theory from the south as standing for an array of different discourses (on multilingualism and diversity) that critically engage the question of what it means to be human in a world ridden with powerful hegemonic structures and practices. Southern, then, refers to those individuals and constituencies suffering historical hegemony rather than a geopolitically delimited space. Southern epistemologies would then comprise, in the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos:

... the retrieval of new processes of production and valorisation of valid knowledges, whether scientific or nonscientific, and of new relations among different types of knowledge on the basis of the practices of the classes and social groups that have suffered, in a systematic way, the oppression and discrimination caused by capitalism and colonialism. The global South is thus not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of these populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is here rather a metaphor of the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level, and a metaphor as well of the resistance to overcome or minimise such suffering. It is, therefore, an anticapitalist, anti-colonialist, and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the global North in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalised populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed,

ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia and racism (Santos 2012, p. 51).

We believe that epistemologies of the South must be guided by a stance on ethics as the basis for epistemology and ontology. That is, it is necessary to understand the 'Other' and the world in which 'they' live on 'their' own terms, not by appropriating the Other within a fixed and pre-determined set of (ontological / epistemological) categories, but rather by 'obfuscating' and critically deconstructing such knowledge categories. This in turn requires a reflexive and critical dialogue around basic assumptions of, for example, the role of language in society and in civility. These dialogues cannot avoid raising difficult questions about the global academic industrial complex: what type of knowledge gets published; which authors' voices (in the north and south) are heard, cited and circulated; whose priorities, concepts and models for managing (e.g. linguistic diversity) get onto the agenda. In Boaventura de Sousa Santos' words, in engaging with the people of the Brazilian *favelas* this means reinventing a language for conversation, not conversion or 'aiming to bringing over others to our point of view'.

Over time, we believe that a critical engagement around such questions will contribute to a shift in perception of the roles of the north and south respectively in pointing the way to a more transversal academic community of scholars. However, to get there, we must tackle the step of shifting away from an epistemology (and politics) of certainty towards one based in uncertainty. The historian Cohen says of uncertainty that it '... operates along a different axis. Uncertainty draws attention to the unfinished status of knowledge. *Uncertainty* bears both powers and poetics. Uncertainty signals a distance from closure' (Cohen, 2004: 258). There is no doubt that such a process will unsettle and dismay, as familiar structures of thought, built up over many years of great personal investment, come under fire and as the limitations of the northern theories (the bedrock of our training as linguists and with which we earn our living) become apparent.

It is considerations such as these that offer compelling reasons for the currency of the term southern in the name of this consortium, and why it has been central to our thinking of the network from the outset. This has not been in order to attempt to create a schism between north and south. Rather, it is to take a stance that secures a southern space for scholarly knowledge, expertise, voice and agency in linguistic diversity. It is to hold in check a tendency for northern discourses to drown out voices from 'below' in contemporary discussions. It is driven by a concern to secure a forum for dialogue on a more equal participatory basis among those who seek to understand the south through different metaphors and those who continue to refine the more familiar metaphors of our disciplines.

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