

CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTICS: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By Alastair Pennycook. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001; xiii + pp. 206.

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Critical applied linguistics is, according to the information on the back cover, 'a newly emergent approach to critical questions in language education, discourse analysis, language in the workplace, translation, and other language-related domains.' I am not sure about it being newly emergent although I do agree that it engages with many interesting critical questions in the areas described. Looking back, critical practices and approaches in applied linguistics have been around for more than twenty years. I am thinking here initially of the critical linguistics of Roger Fowler, Gunther Kress, Robert Hodge and Tony Trew, who were the first scholars to conjoin the terms *critical* and *linguistics* (Fowler et al, 1979), albeit not *applied*, but also of critical approaches to language and pedagogy more generally, the work of Fairclough, van Dijk, Freire and Giroux for example. What's new about critical applied linguistics is that the author has gathered all the 'criticals' together - critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis, critical literacy, critical language awareness, critical theory, critical translation, critical language testing, critical pedagogy and other associated theories and practices - under this collective term. The result is a fascinating, provocative, and accessible discussion of critical social theory, critical practice and applied linguistics. The author guides the reader carefully through the complexities of critical social theory, poststructuralism and postmodernism in relation to applied linguistic domains of practice in a manner which is immensely rewarding for both students of language, society and culture and scholars in the various applied linguistic and socio-theoretical domains with which he enters

into dialogue. For this he ought to be congratulated. That said, I ought to note that there is also something in the book to upset everyone. Well, perhaps not everyone, but a fair few anyway. Especially those who adhere to an apolitical, objectivist view of applied linguistics, or ‘liberal-ostrichism’ as Pennycook rather provocatively terms it (p. 29). Liberal-ostrichism is ‘head in the sand’ applied linguistics. It is an applied linguistics which, according to the author, hypocritically denies its own politics. The author associates this kind of applied linguistics particularly with Henry Widdowson, perhaps the most vociferous opponent of all approaches to applied linguistics which call themselves critical. Reading Pennycook’s critique of Widdowson’s applied linguistics it was satisfying to note that he is prepared to return ‘with interest’ many of the criticisms which Widdowson has leveled at critical practices in applied linguistics in recent years, critical discourse analysis being his (Widdowson’s) favored object of derision (see Widdowson, 2000 for example). If you are familiar with this debate, and particularly if you are a critical practitioner yourself, you are likely to enjoy this aspect of the book as much as I did. If, on the other hand, you are familiar with the debate but not sympathetic to critical approaches in applied linguistics, prepare to be upset, or at least disconcerted.

Pennycook does not set out to provide a definition of critical applied linguistics (henceforward CAL) ‘but to raise a number of important concerns and questions that can bring us closer to an understanding of this area’ (p. 1). In summary, these are:

- CAL as *praxis*;
- CAL as ‘strong’ applied linguistics as opposed to ‘weak’, e.g. liberal-ostrichist, applied linguistics;
- the relationship between micro and macro relations in the production and practice of language in use;

- the meaning of ‘critical’ in CAL;
- the limits of knowing and preferred futures.

CAL as *praxis*

Praxis is to be understood as ‘a constant reciprocal relationship between theory and practice’ (p. 3), rather than as a theory to be applied to practice. The author sees the two as complexly interwoven and so does not wish to produce a model of practice which exemplifies a CAL approach. There are thus, unfortunately in my opinion, no examples of how critical applied linguistics might be practised.

CAL as ‘strong’ applied linguistics

CAL is strong applied linguistics because it does not simply apply knowledge about linguistics to different contexts, but draws upon multiple disciplines and multiple knowledges in investigating language in use in a wide range of social contexts.

The relationship between micro and macro relations in the production and practice of language in use

Here the author reprises the by now familiar critical discourse synergies ‘between concepts of society, ideology, global capitalism, colonialism, education, gender, racism, sexuality, class, and classroom utterances, translations, conversations, genres, second language acquisition, media texts’ (p. 5). How the macro relates to the micro and vice-versa is for Pennycook a central concern of CAL, but analyses of these relations must not become an end in themselves, they must lead to social critique and transformation.

The meaning of ‘critical’ in CAL

Here the debate is between ‘the modernist-emancipatory position and the postmodern-problematizing position.’ (p. 4) The author aligns himself with the latter position throughout the book. He views CAL as a postmodern problematizing practice or, to be more precise, he favors Dean’s (1994: 4) description of critical practice as ‘a restless problematization of the given.’ This is a slightly more complex as well as original departure from more classically critical approaches to applied linguistics, such as that of critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis and critical language awareness, and it is the key to the rest of the book.

Pennycook notes that one way into social critique and conceptions of transformation is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. That is, the theoretical neo-Marxism of the 20th century German thinkers, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Fromm, Marcuse and, extending into the 21st century, Jürgen Habermas. While acknowledging the profound contribution of the Frankfurt theorists to the radical critique of capitalist social formations and indeed to his own perception of critical applied linguistics, Pennycook is unable to endorse the notion of post-emancipatory rationalism which they propose. This is because the problematic which underlies their emancipatory thesis is one which remains wedded to a largely uniform vision of the post-emancipation society. To put this another way, the critical theorists, like Marxists and other emancipatory modernists before them engage in emancipation narratives in which the dissonances, inequalities and conflicts of the present are swept away and replaced by a ‘corrective’ final ordering or final reading of the social. Pennycook is deeply skeptical about theories, social and applied linguistic, which couch their analyses in terms of a search for ultimate knowledge or truths, i.e. final readings (O’Regan, 2002). He prefers instead to engage in postmodern problematizing practices. Not a search for truth, but an interminable questioning. This involves ‘turning a skeptical eye toward assumptions, ideas that have

become “naturalized,” notions that are no longer questioned’ (p. 7). This applies to social questions of power and control in relation to language use in addition to ‘everyday categories of applied linguistics: language, learning, communication, difference, context, text, culture, meaning, translation, writing, literacy, assessment, and so on.’ (p. 8). CAL must be self-reflexive.

The limits of knowing and preferred futures

Pennycook’s problematizing practice as an interminable questioning, rejecting as it does notions of truth and ultimate knowledge, places a Kantian limit on what can be known. He accepts, following Haraway (1988), that it is not possible to know everything and in so doing is prepared to accept a certain amount of relativist thinking into his own position and therefore into CAL as well. He doesn’t mind this tension because the most important thing is to raise ‘a host of new and difficult questions about knowledge, politics and ethics’ (p.8), not to prescribe ‘new orthodoxies’, models and procedures - which would also explain his reluctance to provide illustrations of how CAL might be practised. Although the author is not prepared to endorse a preferred post-emancipatory future, he is prepared to entertain what he calls ‘preferred futures’ (p. 8). This very useful conception holds that there are future directions in which we might want to head which are preferable to the present situations we are in, but that these future directions are not dependent upon Lyotardian modernist metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). More problematic however, and perhaps appropriately so, is whether preferred futures can be entirely non-normative. Pennycook argues that ethics is central to CAL, but also maintains that ‘ethics is not a normative or moralistic code of practice’ (p. 9). This is a very difficult position to take. Is it possible to argue ethically and yet non-normatively? Are preferred futures only pluralized normativities? One way out of this cul-de-sac perhaps is to argue that while ethics relies upon some conception of right and

wrong, good and bad, preferred and dispreferred, this does not entail a desire to impose a final ordering or closure. Rather it signals a desire to transform for the better, specifically in the interests of non-closure, of keeping the social (and the applied linguistic) open, and of ‘bring(ing) into being new schemas of politicization’ (Foucault, 1980:190). Interested readers and those familiar with Pennycook’s other work (Pennycook, 1994, 1998) will note that Foucault is, and continues to be, a major influence upon his thinking. A surprising omission given these interests, and Foucault notwithstanding, is any reference to Derrida, because Pennycook’s post-modern problematizing practice (or *heterosis* as he refers to it) would seem to fit very well into Derridean deconstructive philosophy. Take for example this following assertion by Derrida, ‘The only attitude (the only politics – judicial, medical, pedagogical, and so forth) I would *absolutely* condemn is one which directly or indirectly, cuts off the possibility of an essentially interminable questioning, that is, an effective and thus transforming questioning’ (Derrida, 1995: 239). Derrida, I believe, has a significant contribution to make to CAL in this area.

The other philosopher who might warrant further examination in this context is Habermas. Unlike Derrida, Habermas, as one of the Frankfurt critical theorists as well as a major thinker of the day, does receive extended documentary attention in the book (see chapter 2), but only in so far as Habermas represents a particular form of emancipatory modernism about which Pennycook is largely skeptical. That is, one ‘in which power is held by the oppressors (the dominant bloc) and maintained by ideology, and in which emancipation can be brought about as a result of awareness of the operations of ideology’ (p. 42). Pennycook argues that Habermas is insufficiently self-reflexive about the emancipatory knowledge interest upon which his theory of communicative action and universal consensus is based. What is needed is the postmodern problematizing practice referred to earlier to disabuse his emancipatory

modernism of its idealism and its *scientific* claims upon truth. The Foucauldian influences here are very evident. What this perspective overlooks however is the potential reinforcement Habermasian critical theory can give to the problematizing practice which the author is advocating, particularly in the context of critical approaches to language and pedagogy. I am thinking here of the Habermasian public sphere and the importance placed by Habermas upon the public sphere as a center of dialogue and debate where citizen's may discuss freely public matters of social and political importance (Habermas, 1989a, 1996). This necessarily involves problematization of given, i.e. naturalized and dominant, interpretations of reality. 'Naturally this does not mean that interpretation must lead in every case to a stable and unambiguously differentiated assignment. Stability and absence of ambiguity are rather the exception in the communicative practice of everyday life' (Habermas, 1989b: 155). I find the correspondence between what Habermas seems to be saying about discursivity in the public sphere and what Foucault and Derrida say respectively about new schemas of politicisation and transformative questioning highly relevant for CAL (O'Regan, *ibid.*). There is a complementarity here which the protagonists (1), their respective supporters (2), and the author seem to have overlooked. In the case of the former (1 and 2) this has often been by choice (see Best and Kellner, 1991).

Pennycook's *Critical Applied Linguistics* is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter, *Introducing Critical Applied Linguistics*, has for the most part been summarized here. In the remaining chapters he expands upon the concerns raised in this chapter according to a series of political themes: the politics of knowledge, the politics of language, the politics of texts, the politics of pedagogy, the politics of difference and finally the politics of applied linguistics (or applied linguistics with an attitude), devoting a chapter to each one. In the process he provides a stimulating and insightful overview of current as well as past concerns

in applied linguistics and critical social theory, and makes a significant contribution to the development of a field of critical applied linguistics which I recognize as one to which I belong.

Critical Applied Linguistics is a very useful book which will be welcomed by undergraduate and graduate students and by very many scholars in the critical domains covered by it. I still believe, despite what the author says, that some exemplifications of the approach would be useful. How would he set up a problematizing practice with a text for example? What procedures would he suggest? How would his problematization of the text compare *in practice* with that of critical discourse analysis or critical language awareness? For myself, the book is thus a chapter short, but it is still to be highly recommended for all that.

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