INTRODUCTION

# Reflexivity and social change in applied linguistics

Miguel Pérez-Milans
UCL Institute of Education, University College London

## Reflexivity, applied linguistics and social theory

Recently, attempts have been made to revise foundational categories in Applied Linguistics (AL, hereafter). Following up on Brumfit's (1995) definition of the field as the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue, Lillis (2015) invites us to re-theorize the dominant approaches to the very concepts of language and communication. A similar endeavor can also be noted in Block's call for more explicit theoretical attention to social class as a construct in applied linguistics (2014). This interest in theoretical revisiting echoes earlier statements by Sarangi and Candlin (2003) in their editorial in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Applied Linguistics*:

> Although applied linguistics has a commitment to its necessary collaborators, it has, also, an equal commitment and obligation to itself. As a scholarly endeavour, it cannot be sustained only by its service provisions, however legitimate. It has constantly to work to develop generalizable principles of theoretical and analytic insights which will enable it to say not only what it does, but why what it does is grounded in coherent and sustainable argument. (p. 3)

This thematic issue aims to continue in the same revisional spirit by shifting the focus towards the study of reflexivity as a window to further theoretical, methodological and analytical exploration both of language-related phenomena, and of phenomena of a different social nature that are explored through language. In particular, reflexivity is addressed here as a fruitful arena for re-examining the interrelationships between language, communication, culture and society, though the volume proposes an alternative approach to the one predominantly found in sociological and AL-based research.

In AL, reflexivity has been explored mainly with reference to the research process itself (Sarangi & Candlin 2003; Giampapa & Lamoureux 2011; Starfield 2013; Clark & Dervin 2014; Lillis 2015). Thus, emphasis is often placed on ethical

dimensions of theory building whereby the researcher is expected to reflectively connect ontological and epistemological perspectives with accounts of the social world and of research participants. In other words, reflexivity is in this tradition conceptualized as a necessary commitment through which researchers uncover their respective roles as key social actors shaping the very social processes they intend to study and analyze.

This major body of work on reflexivity in AL has been productive in education and health-care related research projects where researchers and practitioners collaborate with participants. In an attempt to create the foreground for a mediator role for themselves as applied linguists, these researchers contribute to bridging the distance between researchers and their target audiences or addressees (see further discussions on this distance, in Roberts 2003). However, this researcher-centered angle to reflexivity also raises concerns that we researchers may end up foregrounding ourselves at the expense of attention to other relevant social processes that matter most to our participants/audiences, beyond the research process itself (Heller 2011).

In contrast to AL, sociological research has approached reflexivity with a stronger theoretical interest in the interrelations between local practices and wider social processes of change. According to this tradition, reflexivity is generally defined as a rising form of socially conditioned self-awareness through which the individual determines her course of action in relation to the social circumstances (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Bourdieu 1992; Castells 1997; Archer 2012). Further to this point, the reflexive imperative is described as an emergent property of the self under socioeconomic and cultural conditions of late modernity. As stable and bounded cultural systems are harder to be reproduced, this reflexive self is seen to be strengthening. Thus, social theorists argue, the subject has the opportunity to construct a self-identity dis-embedded from previously taken-for-granted customs, habits, routines, expectations and beliefs.

Of particular relevance is the work by Margaret Archer, within the sociological strand of critical realism, which empirically describes changing dominant modes of reflexivity among youth in contemporary societies (2003, 2007, 2010, 2012). Due to increasing uncertainty and contextual incongruity, Archer states, young people are no longer in a position to draw guidance from their past 'natal backgrounds' for actions required for shaping the present and the future of life. Thus, she argues, sociological constructions that from the 20th century onwards have emphasized reproduction and contextual continuity as the dominant *modus vivendi* – such as Bourdieu's notions of 'habitus' and 'cultural capital' – are not suitable for providing accounts of the ways in which youth navigate the social order today (2012).

This sociological perspective suggests potential avenues for AL research since it opens up a door to interdisciplinary dialogues across social psychology, sociology and linguistics. Among such avenues, two are particularly tuned to the purpose of this thematic issue. Firstly, this sociological work sets the ground for a linguistic perspective on reflexivity, since discourse is a fundamental resource for social actors to enact (and for researchers to have access to) those very forms of self-awareness with which they shape their social circumstances and lives. Secondly, it also provides a framework for the study of young people's practices and dilemmas as a relevant window to wider social, cultural and economic transformation. But while constituting a key entry point, these two avenues are not yet enough to capture the specific approach adopted in the collection introduced here

## Reflexivity, agency and structure: From critical realism to the language disciplines

A further distinction, concerned with the ontological relationship between individual agency and social structure, needs to be introduced at this point. Though AL has been greatly influenced – at least in the socio-culturally oriented research tradition – by the sociological positions that claim a mutually constitutive relationship between individuals and structures (e.g., Giddens 1984), some of the latest developments in social theory seem to be taking a different path. This is the case of critical realism whereby individual actors and structural constraints are ontologically separated in order to account for instances of deliberation in which reflexivity is played out. Archer provides us with a rationale for this separation, in her critique to what she calls "conflationist theories" of agency/structure in sociology:

> The explanation of this lack of engagement with reflexive processes is argued here to derive from Beck's 'central conflationism', that is, his elision of structure with agency, which means that the interplay between them cannot be examined. Unlike Giddens, who has made a principled and theoretical attempt to transcend the distinction between the two through his notion of 'duality', Beck's conflation of structure and agency is empirically based. It stems from his description of what 'structures' and 'agents' have become during late modernity. Whether central conflation is endorsed theoretically or empirically, it remains incompatible with what is required by any workable definition of reflexivity. By definition, reflexive deliberation depends upon a clear subject-object relationship. It can neither work nor be examined if there is any tendency to conflate the two, that is, to elide the properties and powers pertaining respectively to 'structure' and to 'agents'.
>
> (2007: 34)

Reflexivity is therefore approached as a token of individual agency *par excellence*; it is taken as a form of socially uncontaminated behavior that is constrained by cultural conventions/structures externally, leaving culture ontologically detached from social action. Indeed, this separation of agency and structure leads to epistemological accounts in which evidence is often provided by analysis of interviews where participants' (verbal) accounts of their trajectories are analyzed from a denotational perspective. That is to say, structural properties are conceptualized as just the stuff that is talked about at the research interviews.

This approach may be justified from a sociological standpoint in which language is deemed as theoretically irrelevant (Archer 2007: 14) – notwithstanding that data collection in this tradition relies exclusively on language material. However, its transposition into AL-based research runs into important contradictions. In particular, the above-mentioned separation of agency and structure is deeply incompatible with the historical development of discourse and communication studies where individual actions and cultural conventions are seen as the two sides of the same coin – language being the coin in this metaphor (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Goffman 1967, 1974, 1981; Gumperz & Hymes 1972; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974; Verschueren 1999). In fact, it is through these very instances of local action that actors are seen as performing social activities, identities and constructing social relations in ways that contribute to creating, sustaining and changing cultural (i.e. conventional) models over long timespans.

By engaging with such recent developments, this thematic issue is expected to put a metapragmatic focus into play (Luci 1993), one that pays a close look at the mutually constitutive relationship between language, individual agency and social structure.

## A metapragmatic approach

The articles here depart from accounts of reflexivity where social actors' deliberations are analyzed denotationally via an ontological separation of social actors and structures. From a metapragmatic perspective, reflexivity is viewed as being carried out through genred semiotic and discursive practices whereby socially conventionalized ways of making meaning are reflexively instantiated in ways that allow individuals to position themselves and others with respect to such conventions and to the social meanings / models attached to them. In Agha's words:

> Reflexive operations can fractionally transform a norm, and such operations can recursively be iterated through further semiotic activity (…) Much of the complexity of the ways in which language can clarify social relations for users derives from the capacity of language users to acquire a reflexive grasp of particular aspects of a semiotic norm – *what* the norm is, for *whom* it is a norm, *when* the norm applies, and so on – and to treat such a reflexive grasp as a subsequent basis for communicative messages (…) If we approach these issues by taking a 'view from nowhere' (Nagel 1986), we end up right there. Nowhere. We can only study the intelligibility of social relations for social actors by making reflexive processes a central focus of the study.                                                  (Agha 2007: 8–9)

This perspective has implications, though, since it is linked to three major disciplinary (and interrelated) shifts that set it apart from the type of sociological tradition discussed in the previous section. These shifts involve: a departure from decontextualized accounts of action, towards a focus on the indexicality of language; a transition from denotation to performance in the analysis of meaning; and a replacement of correlational views of linguistic variables and social identities, by a heightened emphasis on description of multiplicity of social positions.

The shift towards indexicality of language (Silverstein 1976, 1985, 2003) moves the attention beyond a previous concern with the relation of linguistic reference to knowledge to examine language use as a form of social action. Thus, analysis focuses on identifying the communicative resources that social actors conventionally draw from in order to be able to make and interpret meaning appropriately, and to negotiate social relations via displaying affiliation/disaffiliation with the interlocutors or with the types of social persona (i.e. social/moral identities) that are associated with such meaning-making practices. In other words, social effects, such as those involving relationships between actors, are taken as highly context-bound or indexical in character: "they are evaluated in relation to the context or situation at hand, including those aspects of the situation created by what has already been said or done" (Agha 2007: 14).

The reflexive nature of language as a mediating platform in which social relations get negotiated through situated action operates at different levels, depending on the communicative features that social actors coordinately drive their attention to. From prosody to lexis to morphosyntax to more interactional architectures that may also involve orientation towards other non-linguistic signs (i.e. gesture, clothing or other features of the setting), interpretation of the function and meaning of these features rely on conventional expectations (or generic models) about the speech event at hand (i.e. appropriate ways of engaging communicatively in the activity). The type of speech event, or speech genre, functions therefore as a guiding framework against which actors negotiate content and social relations in the course of the action (Bakhtin 1986; Hanks 1987; Briggs & Bauman 1992):

> The conventions of genre help define the possibilities of meaning in discourse and the level of generality or specificity at which description is cast. Whether we read a text as fiction, parody, prayer, or documentary is a generic decision with important consequences for interpretation. Viewed as constituent elements in a system of signs, speech genres have value loadings, social distributions, and typical performance styles according to which they are shaped in the course of utterance. (Hanks 1987: 670)

Intimately linked to the one above, the shift from denotation to performance pays specific attention to the ways in which socially conventionalized norms are artfully manipulated upon to yield significant effects such as to reveal something about the characteristics of the content that is being talked about, or of the interpersonal relations among the involved interlocutors. That is to say, cultural expectations regarding appropriate ways of participating in a given context are not considered mere templates that have to be conformed, but instead resources available for either confirming the established norms or for disrupting them with specific communicative purposes in mind (Gumperz 1982: 131; Bauman & Briggs 1990: 73; Hymes 1996: 44–45; Jaffe 2009: 13; Blommaert 2005: 70).

The prominence of the marked, reflexive and artful nature of performance has been elaborated by Bauman (1977) and Bauman & Briggs (1990) who, as recounted by Lucy (1993), view performance "as a reflexive mode of communication which consists of the assumption of responsibility for displaying communicative competence, that is, for speaking well in socially appropriate ways" (p. 21). In becoming accountable to an audience, the performer deals always with "the dynamic tension between the ready-made, socially given element, that is, the persistent cultural entity that is available for re-contextualization in performance, and the emergent element, the transformation of this element in the performance process" (Bauman 1996: 302, in Jaffe 2009: 11). In Jaffe's own words, "every performance is recognized as the performer's 'take' or stance on a particular speech genre, itself recognized as collective, cultural property. It is here that the audience is implicated and has an evaluative role to play; it is also here that we see the connections between the aesthetic and the social/moral orders" (2009: 11).

The shift from correlation to multiplicity of social positions is closely connected to an interest in describing the ways in which communicative conventions associated with given types of social identities get re-contextualized as indices of new emergent (non-expected) subject positions. In this regard, this view does not only take us away from denotational views of meaning, as discussed above; it is also detached from traditional emphasis on correlations between linguistic variables and social identities conceived as more or less fixed. In particular, this shift involves greater attention to the multiple alignments that speakers take up toward their own words, themselves, the situation, and other social actors by managing

the production and reception of their utterances in contexts of interaction with audiences.

The volume takes all the above shifts on board, and focuses specifically on youth as a significant segment of the population, for the study of language, reflexivity and social change.

## Youth and social change through the lens of linguistic ethnography

In increasingly neoliberalized educational institutions where nation-state and transnational-oriented normative meanings/policies co-exist (Pérez-Milans 2015), adolescents have to negotiate a complex set of discursive positions in the making of their academic trajectories across changeable social networks, communicative genres and regional/national boundaries. Thus, contributors follow a linguistically informed approach to the semiotic character of the processes pointed out above, and an ethnographically informed approach to the sociological positions that they generate.

The combination of linguistic and ethnographic perspectives is aligned with the presuppositions of those working in the fields of linguistic anthropology (Hymes 1974), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982), microsociology (Goffman 1981; Erickson 1992), communication studies (Bakhtin 1986, Scollon & Scollon 2003) and critical sociolinguistics (Heller 2002; Martín-Rojo 2010; Duchene, Moyer & Roberts 2013). Therefore, when addressing reflexive practices, less emphasis is placed on mental states emanating from internal conversations that the researcher can access in research interviews.

Instead, this mélange of traditions across various fields share a view of these practices as: (a) enacted and performed discursively and semiotically in situated encounters through the inter-subjective negotiation of meaning; (b) intimately linked to identity work where subjects construct and laminate meanings about space, time, language, culture and community in order to project voice, a sense of ownership and authority; and (c) shaped by individuals' networked interactional histories and the resulting consequences in terms of access to the unequally distributed symbolic and material resources.

Such an approach allows the researcher to overcome the limitations of sociological methods exclusively based on interviews in which these are understood as transparent windows to participants' thoughts (Rampton 2006). This angle also departs from synchronic sociolinguistic analysis of institutional frameworks for action (or random interactions) in fixed space-time locations, in line with accounts in which practices are investigated diachronically with reference to the speakers' trans-local, trans-cultural and trans-lingual trajectories (Blommaert

2010; Pennycook 2012; Canagarajah 2013; O'Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo 2015). Blommaert and Rampton (2016) put it like this, in relation to the current conditions of "superdiversity":

> In the view of the volume of past and present research on diversity, we have reached the stage where individual and clusters of projects can and should now seek *cumulative comparative generalisation*. 'Superdiversity' speaks of rapid change and mobility, and to interrogate this, it is important wherever possible to incorporate the comparison of new and old datasets and studies, as well as to address the perspectives of different generations of informants. Multi-sited comparison across scales, mediating channel/agencies, and institutional settings is likely to be indispensable in any account concerned with ideology, language and everyday life. But there is also now an opportunity for comparison across nation states and different parts of the world. (p. 37)

The next section speaks to this.

## The papers in this collection

The issue includes diverse regional and national contexts (i.e. Singapore, Hong Kong, Spain, Belgium, Finland, USA) involving a variety of participants with different socioeconomic backgrounds and trajectories of social mobility. Though they describe distinct sets of practices, settings and processes, contributors in the thematic issue are oriented towards the following questions that constitute key points of focus:

- What forms of reflexivity emerge from youngsters' actions and ways of making sense of such actions, in the course of their trans-local, trans-cultural and trans-lingual life trajectories and when coping with novel circumstances?
- What discursive laminations of past, present and future are enacted by youth when shaping their lives, with what subsequent forms of performed identification? What ideologies about language, culture and community do they construct and mobilize to do so?
- How do these discursive laminations, ideologies and forms of identification intersect with individuals' differential access to material and symbolic resources throughout their mobile trajectories?
- How do they (re-)evaluate their changing language repertoires and forms of alignment with collective identities (i.e. nationality, social class, ethnicity, community and/or gender), with what subsequent dilemmas, contradictions and paradoxes?

– What implications can be derived from description of these processes and practices in each setting, from the perspective of applied linguistics and its target audiences or addressees?

By describing different indexical forms of language use (i.e. linguistic styles, discourse registers, small narratives, moral stances, metacommentaries and semiotic norms), in the context of the participants' life trajectories, the articles: (a) offer a fresh view of the linguistic/discursive resources that young people mobilize to make their way through the world vis-à-vis wider institutional and socioeconomic processes of change; (b) engage with existing knowledge in social sciences through revisiting well-established constructs in socio-culturally oriented AL (habitus, social field, structuration, modes of reflexivity, cultural capital and social class, among others), in light of the cultural conditions of late modernity; and (c) suggest some specific implications for applied researchers and practitioners.

The first three articles introduce trajectories of unprivileged youth. However, the three cases examined in this part do not necessarily leave us with a determinist portrait where small-case description of local practices is saturated by large-scale processes of socioeconomic reproduction. Rather, the social actors whose practices are described here engage in creative forms of reflexive discourse with different socio-institutional consequences in each setting, sometimes even leading to trajectories of upward social mobility.

The first article, by Heini Lehtonen, offers an account of the ways in which adolescents from families with migrant backgrounds in Helsinki position themselves and others through performative forms of *stylised* "bad Finnish", with regard to prejudices migrants face in their daily lives. Her data show that people with migrant backgrounds are constantly faced with normative and restrictive views and accounts that exclude them from Finnishness and from the ownership of Finnish. In this context, stylised "bad Finnish" is sometimes used by Lehtonen's participants for expressing distance from stereotypical immigrants, but also for displaying solidarity with those who share the experiences of immigration and learning Finnish. Thus, these practices contributed to de-naturalizing the ideologized models and types of persona upon which these students with migrant backgrounds are predominantly positioned as part of an "outgroup". This type of analysis may open up paths for practitioners in education, regarding the potential value of these linguistic practices for exploration of topics on xenophobia and language attitudes that are situationally relevant in urban contexts highly shaped by migration such as Helsinki.

In the second article of the volume, Miguel Pérez-Milans and Carlos Soto critique the sociological conceptualizations of reflexivity that involve individual deliberations. They do so by focusing on the case of a Hong Kong-born young

female with Nepali background who is networked with other social actors and capitalizes herself by discursively constructing the trajectory of an ethnic minority student-activist. Pérez-Milans and Soto describe this student's upward academic journey, from a low-prestige state secondary school to an elite international college in Hong Kong, with reference to the development of a *discourse register* of "doing minority-based activism" that emerged and was shaped in tandem with a series of key institutional events and dominant ethnolinguistic representations against which the focal participant positioned herself. This account illustrates the symbolic value that modernist-based accounts of language and culture still retain in the context of elite institutions globally spread under conditions of late modernity. It also shows that the (online and offline) contemporary communities the focal participant inhabited and used for discursive and reflexive work can be seen as arising from historical shifts that alter the contemporary nature of diaspora and integration into social life, beyond traditional notions of diversity and categories of identity such as ethnicity. Pérez-Milans and Soto's study sheds light on how language learning, specifically in the form of attention to register, can be reflexively used, by students, educators, and researchers to shape, over time, trajectories of identification and to influence involvement in social movements.

The third article, by Adriana Patiño-Santos, focuses on narratives as communicative resources that a group of Latin American girls reflexively mobilized in a diverse school in Madrid, constructing social/moral alignments with gender-based ideas about what it means to be a 'good' girl/daughter/sister. Patiño-Santos identifies the contradictions behind these forms of femininity indexed in daily *small narratives*. While allowing her participants to get placed as "moral gatekeepers" through the display of legitimate identities assigned to Latin American girls by their parents, relatives and peers at school, these reflexive forms of discourse also contribute to the essentialized and fixed types of persona which lead to their 'othering' within the wider socio-institutional order of the school. Thus, the issues raised in this contribution might be of relevance beyond research, to educators and practitioners interested in how newcomers understand and navigate new institutional norms and forms of communication.

The last three articles of the thematic issue turn the reader's attention to trajectories of youth with privilege backgrounds. Away from the traditional emphasis on marginalized social groups, these articles offer a view of how socioeconomic reproduction happens through the analysis of the communicative practices of affluent youngsters who reflexively construct stances, linguistic practices and trajectories in accordance with their own elite aspirations.

In the fourth article, Inge Van Lancker examines the case of a group of high-achieving, white, elite, adolescent pupils in Flemish Belgium. Their metapragmatic practices show the degree of awareness of these youngsters regarding

the relationship between linguistic production and social identity. In particular, Van Lancker's study illustrates the strategic value that ethnolinguistic national-ism-based ideologies of standardization continue to have for youngsters willing to align themselves with elite positions in the future, in the Flemish Belgian mar-ket. Through a micro-analysis of their *metacommentaries* and speech practices, her participants' linguistic reflexivity demonstrates a complex attitude towards Standard Dutch and Standard Language Ideology: at first sight, they seem to in-cline towards linguistic equality, resulting in a relaxation of the standard norm. However, an analysis of the more indirect metapragmatic practices of these boys reveals how they strategically use the symbolic capital of Standard Dutch. Van Lancker's analysis also offers implications for language education in Flanders: her data shows that the Flemish language education policy, built on the promotion of Standard Dutch as a necessary condition for social equality, might actually foster the opposite.

The fifth article, by Luke Lu, shifts the analytical attention to transnational mobility by focusing on the academic trajectory of Singapore- and Vietnam-born students from top-ranked secondary schools in Singapore to internationally top-ranked universities across different national contexts. Lu sheds light on the dis-cursive constitution of a transnational and elitist regime of education that links Southeast Asia to the US and UK. These academically elite students describe a conventional aspiration amongst their peers involving transnational mobility and attending top-ranked universities in the US and UK. Lu's informants discursively construct this aspiration as preferred, with a sense that they are expected to con-form to such a trajectory. Thus, he argues that their consistent orientation toward the ideal trajectory and production of discourse about it denotes a collective *moral stance*, and hence a disposition embedded in a social field. In so doing, Lu also argues for the validity of the Bourdiean notions of "habitus" and "cultural capital" that provide, with adequate adjustment to contemporary patterns of mobility, useful material for making sense of the ways in which transnational elitism is nowadays communicatively enacted and recreated. As discussed in this article, such findings have direct implications for policy-makers in Singapore where mer-itocracy and slogans that "every school is a good school" cannot account for the ways in which social inequity is institutionally reproduced.

In the sixth, Peter De Costa, Magda Tigchelaar and Yaqiong Cui explore the case of a Chinese international student at a US university. The focus in this ar-ticle is kept on the study of trajectories of transnational elitism analyzed from a Bourdiean perspective. The analysis in this case, though, engages with Archer's "modes of reflexivity" (2012) from the perspective of an ethnographically and discursively oriented approach that directs the reader's attention towards the uncertainties and complexities faced by international students, given that these

uncertainties are often overlooked by the grand narrative of the global elite that predominates in existing literature. Further to this point, the trajectory of their focal participant also calls into question the myth that English acquisition always guarantees social mobility. De Costa, Magda and Cui examine the trajectory of their participant by focusing on his reflexive grasp of particular aspects of *semiotic norms* across different communicative genres. Based on this analysis, the article discusses some of the pedagogical implications for practitioners, in order for them to create positions of power so that transnational learners align their effective abilities and succeed academically.

Finally, Jürgen Jaspers' commentary on this thematic issue frames the contributions within broader contemporary developments in the field of applied linguistics, with attention to the implications that are derived from the findings in the volume.

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