Book Review

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Rethinking the concept of linguistic assemblage to revisit the understanding of agency, creativity and language policy

Lionel Wee, *Posthumanist Word Englishes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. vi+75. Hardback $22.00, ISBN: 9781108990615

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Linguistic inquiries typically emphasize the role of humans as agents as well as a language as a medium to transmit messages, ideas, or thoughts to others. In this framework, the people, as users and agents of the language, play a dominant role, if not primary, in language communication, meaning construction, or agency performance. They have the ability to further respond to a certain act, for instance, to use or not to use English as the medium of communication in a particular context. While this idea may be true to some extent, it is problematic in that it ignores the role of non-human factors that can help shape the action or decision made by a person. Given the rapid growth of technologies and the massive use of artificial intelligence (AI) for communication and research, and their roles in the teaching and learning of languages (Liang et al., 2021), especially foreign languages, it is essential to rethink the roles, functions, and impacts of non-human and beyond human-based entities on the understanding of agency, creativity, and language policy. By foregrounding the linguistic assemblage, Lionel Wee in *Posthumanist World Englishes* invites readers, including theoretical and applied linguists, to detach from a taken-for-granted anthropocentric standpoint and consider an alternative way of thinking, called posthumanism, to the study of applied linguistics and world Englishes (Braidotti, 2019; Pennycook, 2018). Like Pennycook (2018), Wee does not regard posthumanism as 'a fixed body of thought'; rather, he views it as 'an umbrella term, a navigational tool for understanding a present undergoing massive change' (Pennycook, 2018: 6).

The book consists of five chapters. The author highlights the problems regarding anthropocentric views in the study of language and sheds important light on linguistic assemblage through the discussion of agency, creativity, and language policy. In Chapter 1, the author presents critiques of a human-centric approach to understanding human and non-human relationship as well as agency. This approach, he argues, disregards the role of non-human entities in constructing the agency that a person has. To illustrate, he argues that a person with a gun is no longer the same person compared to the one who does not hold a gun; he or she thus has a different agentic role. A combination of a person + a tool (thing) + an intention or desire can constitute a network, which may be different according to what things are, as well as what desires that he or she has. The combination of human and non-human entities can facilitate a certain type of action to be carried out over another. The ontological and epistemological discussions of posthumanism and the linguistic assemblage are the central focus of Chapter 2. With linguistic assemblage, the author emphasizes the importance of viewing language as non-bounded or self-contained system. Put differently, linguistic assemblage is a contingent mix of practices and things – both physical and non-physical *semiotics*. He also highlights that there is no language in its totality. The author argues that posthumanism and the concept of assemblages share a similar spirit of thought in that they reject the assumption that entities, including agency and language use in communities, have 'stable interiors and exteriors' (p. 17). He further contends that non-linguistic modalities should be viewed and regarded equally essential as those of other linguistic modalities in meaning-making processes.

Chapter 3 and 4 provide the main discussion on how posthumanism and the conceptualization of linguistic assemblage can be used to understand the rapid spread and growth of Englishes, which are mediated through, by some degrees, multifaceted technologies and media, as well as language policy. The author exemplifies the case of

creativity and indexicality by referring to the word *purple* as a verb used by Korean pop singers, BTS, and their fans. The new meaning generated from the word *purple* relies not only on its prior morpho-semantic category, but also on its affirmative attribution to the colour of purple in rainbow, as well as on the popularity of BTS, massive social media usage of this word, and other technology-aided communication tools. In addition, a certain way of speaking, form, or variation of language may index social status, hierarchy, or power. The author uses the sound /t/ release as the example as it can index numerous interpretations from *being formal*, *being British*, to *being educated*. With this understanding, agency is made of assemblages of speakers, their desire, and the medium (or media) they use – including the language and its variety they use, as well as technology that helps transmit the intention or enables the action.

Wee also argues that a posthumanist perspective may help researchers, applied linguists, or policymakers to be open for critical reflection in policy making or policy formulation. He adds that the conceptualization of assemblages can be applied to rethink about language (policy) management, that is, the efforts or endeavours to modify practices over the speakers of the speech community. He points out that the efforts may not always be present, and there could be language policy cases without management. The author illustrates the case of signage, which uses English only, in multilingual Singapore in that such a policy is considered a *default* policy. Using English only in the signage is considered a mundane practice, in which people do not even question its use and acceptability. By viewing language policy as assemblages, the author argues that language policy is not a constant entity but is mobile and subject to *mutation*; the policy can be constituted, based on existing policy elsewhere, and reconstituted 'as somewhat different policy assemblage' (p. 46). The author closes the book with a fresh and thought-provoking discussion of *ontological naivety*, lack of persistence to engage with unpopular ontological concerns, and *ontological curiosity*, a serious engagement with questions that may backlash with such generally taken-for granted notions as 'how languages, including standard English and its non-standard counterparts, are constituted' (p. 60).

This book foregrounds ontological and epistemological justification in regard to the use of a posthumanist perspective in the study of language, particularly world Englishes. The book adds insights to and resonates with similar work by Pennycook (2018), *Posthumanist Applied Linguistics*. Although the notion of posthumanism is not new (Braidotti, 2019), the application of such a way of thinking can refresh, if not intervene, the almost saturated ethnocentric perspectives on the understanding of agency, creativity, and language management. Posthumanism encourages us to critically rethink the relation between humans and non-humans. In this book, Lionel Wee, like Pennycook, has proposed and argued for its philosophical foundations along with up-to-date examples. Nevertheless, given its very nature as a rather abstract thought, the posthumanist approach may offer challenges when it comes to practicality. For instance, with linguistic assemblage, the interpretation, discussion, and analysis of English language teachers' agency become more complex, dynamic, and fluid. Not only should the researcher take into account the non-human entities that may shape and inform the agentic role of teachers, but they also need to pay attention to what kinds of media or tools that help teachers perform their agencies, how they are enacted and constituted, or how these combinations of people and things play their role(s) in performing the agency.

It seems necessary to also include a robust discussion about the axiological dimension and feasibility of posthumanism, as an approach, in the study of language. As a researcher who is interested in Englishes and the medium of instruction, I would ask myself how posthumanist approach can benefit my work, my participants, and institutions and thus contribute to teaching, research, and community. In addition, some researchers may also be curious about how we should engage with issues about ethics when both human and non-human entities are considered, and how to design the research, collect data, and interpret the results from both components. And more importantly, proponents of posthumanist approach may need to also assure that this approach is not merely to replace the old regime with another new one. Posthumanism in applied linguistics and world Englishes is, I would say, a work in progress. Although its ontological and epistemological arguments have been built since a couple decades ago, it still requires practical and tangible *ways of knowing* and *ways of doing*. These questions and concerns may help proponents of the posthumanist approach to ponder on its applicability in the study of world Englishes in particular, in language in use and language policy in general.

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