



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Criticality, identity, and ethics: Toward the construction of ethical subjectivity in applied linguistics research

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Abstract

Criticality has become legitimate and prominent in the field of applied linguistics. Given the realities of our uncertain and worrying times, however, it is essential to consider (a) how criticality can move beyond the rhetoric of inclusion, social transformation, and justice, and (b) the direction(s) in which critical applied linguistics research must point. This paper conjoins criticality, identity, and ethics and proposes the construction of ethical subjectivity as a way to reorient applied linguistics research toward the public good. Drawing on Foucault’s later work, I contend that the process of becoming an ethical subject, which involves both internal and external transformations, would create alternative spaces and ways of action—giving new momentum to the project of realizing the world we wish to live in together.

초록

비판성은 응용언어학 분야에서 두드러진 정당성을 확보해왔다. 하지만 이 시대의 불확실하고 불안한 현실을 감안할 때, 비판성이 어떻게 포용, 사회 변혁 및 정의라는 수사학을 넘어서 수 있을 수 있으며, 비판적 응용언어학 연구가 어느 방향을 지향해야 할지 고찰하는 일은 필수적이다. 이 논문은 비판성, 정체성 및 윤리를 결합하여, 공익을 향한 응용언어학 연구의 방향을 재조정하기 위한 방안으로 윤리적 주관성(subjectivity)의 구축을 제안한다. 저자는 푸코의 후기 연구에 의거하여, 내적 및 외적 변혁을 수반하는 윤리적 주체화 과정이 대안적 공간과 행동 방식을 만들 것이며, 이는 우리가 함께 살고자 하는 세상을 실현하는 프로젝트에 새로운 탄력을 줄 것이라고 주장한다.

The critical Marxist tradition took root in the humanities and social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century and was influential in the development of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and also the emergence of poststructuralism. Despite distinctive theoretical orientations, both challenged taken-for-granted assumptions underlying social structures and, in so doing, provided conceptual means for critical approaches to language, literacy, and pedagogy. Critical discourse analysis and

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Freirean critical pedagogy, which inherited the legacy of Marxist schools of thought, aimed to reveal how everyday practices, interactions, and texts help (re)produce structural inequalities with the goal of liberating the self from systematic oppression. Parallel to this, poststructuralist researchers, sometimes rejecting Marxist ideas, examined the role of language in relation to power, discourse, and subjectivity. For instance, working in conjunction with feminism, poststructuralists uncovered the repressive nature of some key notions in critical pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989) and complicated the discursive construction of racial and gender identities (Ibrahim, 1999). Engaging in postcolonial theory, poststructuralist scholars also attempted to decenter standardized English by decolonizing Western-based knowledge, developing context-sensitive pedagogies originated in indigenous traditions, and validating localized varieties of English (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999).

It was Pennycook (2001) who synthesized key ideas from critical linguists—some of whom may not have referred to themselves as critical—and integrated them under the name critical applied linguistics. With an emphasis on Foucauldian poststructuralism, he mapped out new conditions of possibility to problematize normalized assumptions, examine various types of injustices, scrutinize the reproduction of inequitable access to social power, listen to the voices of the Other, and seek visions for positive change. For instance, critical applied linguists have analyzed ideologies of capitalism and neoliberalism (e.g., Bernstein et al., 2015) and investigated exploitative practices surrounding racism, white privilege, heteronormativity, and language and cultural diversity (e.g., Flores & Rosa, 2015). Others have explored how minoritized individuals experience and resist different forms of discrimination in and out of educational contexts and how they understand the workings of meaning-making and develop identity repertoires (e.g., Shin, 2019). Some critics considered Marxist or Foucauldian lenses to be outmoded due to their anthropocentric and logocentric focus (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2009). Responses to such criticisms ensued; Toohey (2019), for example, endeavored to evoke the entanglements of humans and nonhumans in a world of materials.

Although criticality as a concept has been contested (Luke, 2004), it has become legitimate and prominent in applied linguistics. Nevertheless, the consequences of neoliberal globalization are horrific. Regarding language and its relation to culture and freedom, the deleterious workings of commodification have caused great harm, with many communities experiencing a loss of belonging. Indeed, these widespread trends are distressing enough to bring shame to many applied linguists. As Kubota and Miller (2017) contended, being intoxicated by the elevated status of criticality, we have been too busy to competitively publish how we theorize the world. Unable to break out of the academic bubble, we have missed too many opportunities to work with our communities and generate *real* social change. This disgraceful self-portrait certainly does not dilute the acute need to better enact criticality in applied linguistics. Yet, more difficult and fundamental questions await. How can criticality in the field move beyond the rhetoric of inclusion, social transformation, and justice? In which direction should critical applied linguistics research point?

This paper offers a tentative answer to these questions by conjoining criticality, identity, and ethics and proposing the formation of ethical subjectivity to reorient applied linguistics research toward the public good. Drawing on Foucault's later work, I reconceptualize criticality as an intersubjective space that gives birth to the ethical subject, and I discuss how the process of becoming an ethical subject helps "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (Foucault, 1997, p.xxxv). Ethical work, which involves both internal

and external transformations, would disseminate a social justice lens and create alternative spaces and ways of action, giving new momentum to the project of becoming free and realizing the world we wish to live in together.

Criticality in Research on Identity and Language

The study of identity and language is an area of applied linguistics that offers a good case for examining criticality and arguing for the need to regard both researchers and participants as ethical subjects. As Kramsch (2013) chronicled, applied linguists' interest in investigating identity has been paved by historical and geopolitical upheavals, including internationalization, deregulation and marketization, mass migration, a changing global political-economic order, and technological advances. Researchers have investigated how individuals' previous experiences and life trajectories—which always prominently include language—shape how they view themselves; how they are perceived and positioned by others across geopolitical, ethnolinguistic, and virtual contexts; how they build/lose their sense of belonging and respective legitimacy; and how they (re)define their identities (see Preece, 2016). In particular, language and literacy education functions as an important domain of identity research, for it enables both learners and teachers to understand themselves in their sociohistorical milieu, visualize imagined communities, explore diverse semiotic resources, and produce alternative identities.

A vital imperative in identity research is to transcend the structuralist, positivist mode of inquiry prevalent in academia that ascribes a totalizing identity to one's group membership and that focuses on discovering a unitary, coherent, fixed, and "true" self. Thus, the poststructuralist conceptualization of identity has been enthusiastically employed in applied linguistics ever since Peirce's (1995) groundbreaking article. An individual is understood as a subject inscribed by language, race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, national origin, and the intersectionality of these positionalities. Because an individual is subject to historical legacies, socioeconomic circumstances, and competing ideologies, identity becomes a site of struggle. Identity is taken up, enacted, performed, or contested in any interactional context, and it is therefore always multiple, fluid, precarious, and contradictory.

The co-constructed, (non)negotiable, and spatiotemporal nature of identity formation points to the deep-rooted tension between structure and agency (Weedon, 1987). As a result, researchers have sought to examine the conditions for identity (re)construction, expand an array of available identity options, and, in the end, deconstruct deficit perspectives of the minoritized. Specifically, applied linguists have uncovered and challenged social inequality by scrutinizing sociocultural, political, and economic contexts that (dis)allow individuals to secure the right to speak and be heard. For example, Rahman (2009) found that the institutional demands to adhere to a uniform, prescribed script and to acquire a particular accent "natural" to those in the U.S. compelled service representatives in Pakistani call centers to perform heavily coached identities. Oostendorp (*in press*) showed how pertinent ideologies and access to material resources in South Africa excluded black students and positioned them either as invisible and problematic or as unexpectedly—and, thus, suspiciously—intelligent. Creese et al. (2006) illustrated that Gujarati complementary schools in England (a) created spaces that endorsed flexible bilingualism and offered alternative discourses not often available in mainstream education and (b) enabled young people to discern the ambiguity of ethnicity as a social category and to strengthen their identities as bilingual and multicultural learners.

Building upon the understanding that individuals must contend with structural constraints, critical applied linguists have investigated how individuals exert their agency by bricolaging linguistic practices and trying out different identities. For instance, Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele (2016) examined how multilingual speakers in a low-income urban township school in South Africa strategically used semiotic repertoires to foreground particular identity positions or to deploy new ones, negotiating and subverting hierarchies of interactional orders and values associated with linguistic and cultural capital. Similarly, a Latinx teenager in Catalonia in Block and Corona's (2014) study was seen as a poor Black male due to the way he dressed; to position himself in a more symbolically esteemed way, he chose to meet the dominant expectations of the host society by dressing like a rapper. Given the importance of teachers in training learners to be subjects of positive change, much work has focused on critical teacher identity and different ways to support teachers to enact criticality in the classroom (e.g., Shin & Rubio, *under review*).

To sum up, the line of critical inquiry in applied linguistics that is concerned with poststructuralist notions of identity has endeavored to reveal the unequal distribution of resources and discrimination against the marginalized and to restore their agency by vindicating their lived experiences and contesting the ideological basis for inequality. Such explorations of the tensions between structure and agency have reframed minorities' linguistic and cultural practices from the manifestation of deficits in their capacities to the demonstration of their skillful, strategic, and inventive use of affordances in various contexts.

The Intersection of Criticality and Identity: Toward a Theory of Ethics

Despite the theoretical and empirical advancement of critical research and its commitment to equity, some questions still linger. Is the investigation of the tension between structure and agency a sufficient end in itself? In exploring how people use the very discursive systems that confine them to their advantage, how do we move beyond the relations between structure and agency to create positive social change? As criticality is a fundamental pillar of research in applied linguistics, in which direction should this criticality that we aspire to promote move? To offer a critical framework for social justice-affirming applied linguistics, it is essential to give space to the identity constitution of those involved in research and the role of ethical subjectivity and intersubjectivity in creating knowledge. In doing so, we must ask "what, given the contemporary order of being, can I be?" (Butler, 2004, p.58). Drawing on Foucault's theory of ethics, which centers around the process of the formation of the self, I argue that the construction of ethical subjectivity should be the heart of "the situated refusal of the present as definitive of that which is possible" (Simon, 1992, p.30) and should direct us to better address and repair intersecting inequalities.

The Practice of Self-Caring and Critical Intersubjectivity

To Foucault, ethics is neither about judging what is right or wrong nor about complying with universal moral precepts. If an individual is to mold the self in accordance with a certain ideal, they are subjugated to an imposed self, such that the meanings and limits of that self are determined *a priori*. This circumscribes their freedom in that they are impotent, unable to move beyond the prescribed set of boundaries of the self and take up a subject position that corresponds to their dispositions and imaginings.

Instead, ethics is the deliberate practice of freedom that disrupts imposed conditions and allows the self to define, build, or claim an identity that they endorse within contingent circumstances posited in a particular situation (Infinito, 2003). As a subject's reflexive relationship to the self and their life, ethics means being aware of what one is, what they are capable of, what it takes to play a part within a social group, and what they should (not) fear or hope (Foucault, 1988).

One of the major ethical principles Foucault theorized is "the care of the self" in a poststructuralist-criticalist sense that, as Hamann (2009) warned, is far from neoliberal readings. With the premise that one must attend to the self to become a self, it refers to "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men [*sic*] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre" (Foucault, 1986, p.10). This definition emphasizes two features of the practice of devoting oneself to oneself (Foucault, 1988). First, the locus of ethical activity is not so much in the solitary, decontextualized mind but in the deliberate actions that the self performs as they relate to themselves. Second, although the self is influenced by external forces, they also create their own way of living; simultaneously, the process of carrying out themselves has a considerable effect on the self.

Of the technologies and activities involved in the practice of self-caring, critique stands out (Foucault, 1997). Critique takes many forms: identifying the taken-for-granted assumptions and pertinent power-knowledge nexus, challenging illegitimacy and the status quo, revealing the limits of one's epistemological horizon, recognizing the contradiction and eventual transformability of a system, revisiting hitherto neglected discourses, and overturning a hierarchy (see also Foucault, 1988). Critique predicates that the self reflects on and critically appraises their practices in consideration of their standing within the regime of truth. Such practice of reflexivity embedded in critique, despite the risk it introduces, helps the self to ponder over whether what they think, say, and do conforms with their beliefs and values. Further, it offers opportunities for the self to candidly bare uncertainties and difficulties and to reclaim different ways of being—ultimately fulfilling the possibility of desubjectification (Foucault, 1997). Through this process of problematizing the self, shaping and performing new future actions, and effecting a future not yet written, an individual is brought into an ethical and free subject (Foucault, 1980).

Although Foucault's theory of ethics focuses primarily on the self, it does not retreat to individualism or view self-interest as the basis of the construction of ethical subjectivity (Infinito, 2003). Rather, the care of the self is a *social* practice, "giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions" (Foucault, 1988, p.45). The self cannot have meaning without the existence of and interaction with others. The ways the self relates to others and answers others' needs are foundational to the issue of who the self wishes to be in the world. This means that both the conceptual analysis of the normalized present and the enactment of such understanding—namely, praxis—are essential to (re)build the self as an ethical subject. Moreover, as freedom arises from solicitude for others and is not a lasting triumph, the process of forming ethical subjectivity requires the constant reinspection and reconfiguration of the relations in which the self is situated (Infinito, 2003). In turn, what the self is, does, and thinks serves as a resource for others' experiments in constructing who they are and wish to become. The care of the self thus involves a chain of reciprocal obligations, intensifying social relations (Foucault, 1986). In this interdependent, dialectic relationship, the practice of the care of the self is a political

phenomenon that ultimately cultivates the disposition and capacity to position oneself as the Other, put themselves “in another epistemological, discourse, and political space than one would typically inhabit” (Luke, 2004, p.26), and act on something that is far from their advantage (Infinito, 2003). Indeed, the construction of ethical subjectivity can be understood as an art (Foucault, 1986).

Conclusion

Within the realities of our uncertain, worrying times, a more sociopolitically engaged approach to applied linguistics has become more imperative than ever. This has driven some researchers to direct their attention to an ethical lens (e.g., De Costa, 2015; Ortega, 2005). Interlinking criticality, identity, and ethics, this paper suggests the construction of ethical subjectivity as a way to refocus applied linguistics research toward the public good. The ethical subject, based on Foucault’s theory, interrogates their own privilege; it grapples with their own complicity with different hegemonic discourses; it works together on collective issues and addresses difficult challenges. The ethical subject also puts alternative ways of being into practice; it strives to be consistent across what they think, say, and do; and it incites action and change across multiple levels of context.

I understand that setting the constitution of ethical subjectivity as the utmost goal of critical applied linguistics research may be seen as an idealistic aspiration or even a prosaic sermon that paradoxically fixes a person’s essence. However, Foucault’s ethics is a “morality with no claim to universality” (Veyne, 1993, p.2), and becoming an ethical subject is a fundamental source of social transformation that mobilizes different modes of resistance in every corner of society. I hope that the theoretical accounts presented here stimulate dialogue about our own struggles to become ethical subjects and about creative interventions and pedagogical practices that foster ethical subjectivities and lead to large structural changes. Hopefully, this paper opens some space for continued dialogue towards a more nuanced understanding of the intersection of criticality, identity, and ethics in the field.

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