


BOOK REVIEW

Alastair Pennycook, *Language assemblages*

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What is language, really? This question seems taken for granted outside our field; however, scholars in language studies and applied linguistics have long engaged in debate about the natures, histories, parameters, and features of the practices we've come to term collectively as *language*. While language is core to our scholarly identities and shared projects, it eludes easy definition. The question of what language is has been taken up from various perspectives over time, and there is no sign that this is slowing down (perhaps the opposite, as instantiated by this book). As Alastair Pennycook notes in the first chapter of the book, the 'ontological status of language and languages, and thus the subject matter of linguistics, has always been a topic in need of serious discussion' (2).

This work is not motivated just by curiosity; how we understand language has implications for how we use, teach, evaluate, and monitor it across scales, from individual to community and government. Language is a social phenomenon, and I take the stance that it will always be a multiplicity; however, of the multiple ways in which it manifests, we need to ask ourselves what is at stake in each, and how to navigate between the versions we encounter (Mol 1999).

In *Language assemblages*, Pennycook propels this line of inquiry, aiming to 'unsettle regular accounts of knowledge about language' (1). To undertake this task, the author makes use of key theoretical apparatuses, including the assemblage and relational ontology (drawing strongly on authors in anthropology and political ontology). Pennycook posits that language ontologies are plural. The book extends a project of work that Pennycook has developed over time—see, for instance, Pennycook (2017) and Pennycook & Otsuji (2017) for previous work on assemblages—underpinned by the critical lens that defines his scholarship. Overall, the book explores what a *practical theory of language*

for applied linguistics might involve. It unfolds across six chapters, which unpack the author's motivation for exploring language assemblages; clarify his account of language ontologies; present linguistic, semiotic, and sociomaterial assemblages; consider other ontologies of language; and explore applied linguistics as a practical assemblage.

Chapter 1 addresses why we should look at language ontologies. Pennycook argues for a critical and relational view of language as social practice. Language ontologies are cast as plural, just as the social worlds we inhabit are plural. Pennycook works with a form of critical social realism, drawing on Roy Bhaskar, in order to balance realism with relativism.

Chapter 2 introduces frames for theorising ontologies. Pennycook examines where knowledge of language comes from, arguing for an 'emphasis on working WITH people rather than writing ABOUT them, on seeking local rather than outside knowledge' (26). The consequences of linguistic orthodoxies that fail to appreciate complexity are considered—for instance, ideologies which take a normative or singular view of how language should be used. The author makes a convincing case for thinking about language in general, rather than jumping straight into languages. The chapter also introduces the ontological turn and language ontologies. As Pennycook states, the aim is 'to ask what language and languages are, or how they come to be, how they are assembled' (35), noting the importance of recursivity with respect to how we define and frame cultural, ontological, and epistemic differences.

Chapter 3 explores two different language ontologies: language as structure and language as practice. The first frames language(s) as 'self-standing structures' (52). The second concerns language as activity, commonly associated with frames such as translanguaging. A detailed discussion of translanguaging is presented, including salient debates about the concept. The chapter usefully illustrates how scholars involved in such debates can 'talk past each other' if the ontological assumptions underpinning our work are not sufficiently elucidated.

Chapter 4 delineates the language assemblage. The author examines language assemblages, semiotic assemblages, and sociomaterial assemblages as different applications of an assemblage approach in language studies. The chapter draws on a range of theoretical perspectives connected to language and meaning-making as material, embodied, relational, and distributed. The underpinnings of assemblage thinking, stemming from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work, are engaged with briefly. The chapter also brings together perspectives from new materialist scholarship, including Karen Barad's agential realism, as well as Rosi Braidotti's work in posthumanism. Readers might find themselves wanting further detail on some of the theoretical frames introduced—for example, posthumanism, transhumanism, and new materialism are brought into consideration, but how these approaches might align is not unpacked. Pennycook's concluding statement is that it is 'important to tread cautiously here—lest this be seen as yet another imposition of Northern thinking onto the Global South' (108). Such a statement would be better elucidated with a deeper engagement with the assemblage, which has been employed as an analytical tool across fields of study, including the humanities

and science and technology studies, for some time. It has more recently entered the vernacular of those in language studies, prominently through Pennycook's earlier work. While the assemblage can be described as having porous boundaries as a theoretical lens, it nonetheless has a vernacular that accompanies its core concepts, which could be extended further in the book.

Chapter 5 explores diverse ontologies of language, with a particular focus on ontological practices in Indigenous communities. The author attempts to engage with these on their own terms—as is the aim of much ontological work in anthropology—without casting different understandings of language as metaphors. Pennycook narrows into language reclamation and revival efforts, arguing that these can be misdirected without understanding the ontological assumptions underpinning language practices. Citing Mufwene (2016), this is a wicked problem for linguistics that has no easy solution, as the tools of revitalisation efforts (such as standardisation) may not appreciate linguistic realities in place.

Chapter 6 provides a conclusion to the book. Pennycook supports Wee's (2021) assertion that ontological curiosity is important in language studies. Pennycook reiterates a call for applied linguistics to be reassembled 'as temporary assemblages of thought and action that come together at particular moments when language-related concerns need to be addressed' (149). Rather than strongly defining its disciplinary boundaries, he sees the aim of applied linguistics as uniting around broad matters of concern: 'language matters of concern, practical theories of language, and critical and ethical responses' (150). The author argues for a pragmatic view of language ontologies, accepting that 'ontological pluralism means that it is not necessary to insist on one position over another, or to make a case for a particular epistemological case but to seek to understand different ways of being' (136).

Overall, the book presents engaging content and provides strong support for ongoing discussion of language ontologies. The author provides a reading list with relevant sources for each chapter, as well as a comprehensive index. Further questions came to mind as I read the book. How might language ontologies sit together, and how can or should we negotiate gaps where they are not compatible—even incommensurable? Viveiros de Castro's (2004) way of approaching translation as equivocation is an apt consideration here; when attempting to translate across worlds, we 'situate [ourselves] in the space of equivocation' (10). For Yates & Núñez Núñez (2021), 'equivocation reveals the impossibility of perfect translation'; instead, we see 'recursive processes in which multiple actors may be equivocating around similar discourses simultaneously, producing new meaning in the process' (579).

How do we track such iterative ontological practices, which might produce language in multiple, overlapping, and contradictory ways? Finally, and fundamentally, WHAT COUNTS as a language ontology? This is a complex enough question if we talk about human linguistic practice, but what if we examine semiosis more broadly—for instance, through the practices of non-humans with whom we communicate? These questions suggest a need to continue dialoguing with a range of fields to craft our responses, remaining alert to the ethical imperative at the core of our work.

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