Review

Language in a globalised world: Social justice perspectives on mobility and contact
Khawla Badwan (2021)

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Within an increasingly global and multilingual world, language – instead of being static and unchanging – is on the move. Globalisation has led to ‘a re-conceptualisation of the nature of language’ (Wang, 2013: 61). Therefore, how do we understand language in a world of growing mobility and contact, especially in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic? What role does language play in our daily life in a globalised and multicultural world? Language in a globalised world: Social justice perspectives on mobility and contact by Khawla Badwan echoes these questions. In this book, Badwan contends that the globalisation progress has destabilised social and linguistic norms. Stemming from and expanding on the framework of the ‘sociolinguistics of globalisation’ (Blommaert, 2010), this book then attempts to address the linguistic inequalities and new social stratification brought by unprecedented levels of population mobility and contact. As a helpful contribution to sociolinguistics and intercultural communication study, it may attract a wide range of readers, especially researchers interested in addressing language inequality and issues of communication.

The book consists of ten chapters. It unfolds with an introductory chapter, eliciting the discussion about the language for language in daily life and social injustices caused and endured by language. Since the world is becoming increasingly mobile, we are required to revisit our ontologies of language to
reflect our new social reality (Nail, 2019), a new paradigm of sociolinguistics or a so-called ‘sociolinguistics of globalisation’ mentioned above, is imperative. Based on the new paradigm, the discussion in the book provides academics with more approaches and chances of thinking about language. On the whole, this part briefly outlines the topic, aim, and structure of the book, offering the reader the general contents and configuration in the following chapters.

A complete review of the context in which English has become the global lingua franca under the influence of historical processes can be found in Chapter 2. Badwan highlights how the historical and political processes intertwine in complex ways to affect individuals’ understanding of language in societies and form normative schemes. Discussing how historical processes influence the reproduction and reinforcement of dominant language ideologies that shaped the international status of English and other languages today facilitates readers to comprehend the ways in which language statuses are formed. Subsequently, this chapter continues to critically explore the term ‘globalisation’ (p. 15). The author cautions against celebratory discourses of flexibility, superdiversity, and mobility that often accompany the term and problematising globalisation by emphasising ‘globalisation as a project has benefitted some and disadvantaged others’ (p. 22). Furthermore, Badwan reinforces such viewpoint by highlighting ‘globalisation has also resulted in new types of bordering’ (p. 22), thus creating new forms of social differentiation that have affected the language users globally. Undoubtedly, discussions in this chapter will bring readers more insights into language and globalisation.

Chapter 3 elucidates the ‘sociolinguistic market’ (p. 31). The metaphorical market, like a commodity market, treating language as a commodity with value strongly affects the way people talk about language. Nevertheless, in this chapter, we learn that the metaphorical market arranged through dynamic power is not predominant and static since the relationship between the metaphorical social value of languages with their varieties and the privileged status of their speakers works both ways, which leaves room for individuals’ agency ‘to negotiate the regulation of the sociolinguistic market’ (p. 36). In addition, the author draws in conceptual constructions that make sense of the connections among language, power, legitimacy, exchange value, and language’s social stratification. It is convinced that the chapter is conducive to demonstrating further understanding of the language about language observed in public discourses.

Chapter 4 is devoted to establishing a counternarrative about language not based on the metaphoric sociolinguistic market created by the dominant neoliberal discourses about language value and language as a commodity. Against the dominant discourses full of rationality, incorporating the emotional and the
human in language, in some ways, this chapter examines in detail ‘a humanist approach to language by drawing the attention to language as a means of living, connecting, feeling and being human: language as we live with it in our daily life’ (p. 51). Language is more than a means for communication and is becoming and being a self in the world, as Cameron (1998: 272) argues: ‘[P]eople are who they are because of (among other things) the way the talk’. What catches our attention most is that the author exemplifies each of the points she makes with amusing anecdotes she observed during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Additionally, the author brings to the fore linguistic fostership and caring ethics, which renders an unusual narrative of language for us about being and becoming in the world more than just utility and value.

As broad contextual discussions, the first four chapters prepare the groundwork for chapter 5. In order to examine the ontologies of language rooted in ideologies of linguistic essentialism, the chapter starts by discussing how language is commonly imagined as a normative noun, a performative verb, and a political marker of (un)belonging. Also, it stresses struggles posed by prevailing linguistic essentialism discourses, such as ‘linguistic monism’ (p. 57) and ‘linguistic purity’ (p. 58). In the above discussion, Badwan utilises vivid and timely examples to account for three manifestations related to linguistic essentialism: linguistic purity, the one-language-one-community formula, and language labelling as L1 and L2. What immediately strikes readers in this chapter is that the author incorporates posthumanism, new materialism, affective feminist perspectives, and chronotopic contextualisation to develop an extensive understanding of language with a performative perspective, as defined by the term ‘languaging’ (p. 83).

Language and mobility are discussed in Chapter 6. Since the advent of the era of globalisation with an unprecedented increase in population mobility between countries, the world has ushered in a new configuration which calls for a new grand narrative based on mobility and liquidity to conceptualise the world (Nail, 2019: 89). Responding to the call, this chapter, with the author’s previous research on language and mobility by interviewing academic sojourners in United Kingdom Higher Education, develops multiple narratives of ‘ecological orientation to sociolinguistic scales’ (p. 90) from the sociolinguistic perspective. What is the impact of population mobility migrating across time and place on language as well as its value is a question lingering in the mind of mobility scholars for nearly two decades. In this respect, this chapter may furnish readers with enlightening information by presenting the multi-layered and multi-directional narrative, which puts the spotlight on how elements engaged in interaction combine and work for individual semiotic mobility and language value.
Likewise, another remarkable argument in the chapter to consider is ‘while it is crucial not to develop pre-determined expectations of what happens to language in contexts of mobility, we need to be cautious not to indulge in celebratory discourses about individual agency’ (p. 109). Different individuals with different affordances and social positions may lead to various experiences of semiotic mobility, which depend mainly on ‘a range of ecological factors such as the topics being discussed, the interlocutors involved, cultural familiarity with communicative norms, as well as individuals’ social positioning in relation to their interlocutors’ (p. 107). Consequently, it may give inspiration for researchers to study the non-elite lived experiences in future sociolinguistic research concerning language and mobility.

Chapter 7 delves into the fascinating intersection of applied linguistics and social geography. By engaging with diverse place theorisations, this chapter is committed to presenting some comments on the relationships between language and place. Unlike the traditional epistemology of place in sociolinguistics, which refers to the place as a fixed and homogeneous geographical location, this chapter presents a spatial turn based on a relational, subjective, and dynamic understanding of place. In other words, spatiality explores new ways of reimagining places and social norms. And the new understanding of place in the making, on the one hand, broadens scholars’ horizons through which language can be investigated. On the other hand, spatiality drives us to refresh and decolonise our thinking from a different angle, to rethink what to expect in a place, to unlearn and decreate. Furthermore, what also attracted us in this chapter is the place conceptualisations raised, for instance, ‘spatiality’, ‘hospitality’, ‘fostership’, ‘unmooring’, which facilitate the research on language, identity and place. Through these detailed discussions, readers tend to be aware of the vulnerability of language and feel pains and symbolic violence endured and legitimised by different types of participants in the interviews.

‘Who are we in an age of globalisation and mobility?’ is the topic of Chapter 8. The chapter has explored individual identity concerning language, emotions, and place identity narratives to respond to this topic. By investigating identity issues such as identity struggles, from the individual level to the place level, the chapter highlights the function of pervasive discourse involved in social interaction in normalising some subjectivities while isolating others in society, resulting in the sense of strangeness and out-of-placeness among those who do not conform the social mould. In this circumstance, individuals may be pressured to conform and not be stigmatised as ‘strange’ or ‘weird’ from a very young age. What intrigues us most is the vital role of emotions in identity issues, providing a wide lens for researchers studying language and identity. Furthermore, the
discussion on the link between place identity and individual identity centres on multiple levels of granularity in the city, which undoubtedly enlightens readers with extensive cognition of actual linguistic behaviour in society and further directs readers to review narratives about ‘place identity’ (p. 163) and ‘individuals identity’ (p. 163).

The discussion of language and social justice is found in Chapter 9. The author believes that language should be widely recognised as one of the concerns for social justice, which covers race, religion, sexuality, and more. Thereupon, this part further elucidates how language is inextricably linked to all of the protected qualities in UK anti-discrimination law, suggesting that language must be protected from repressive and discriminatory ideas and practices. What impresses readers most in this chapter is the language-based advocacy, an elastic three-step roadmap that requires awareness, solidarity, and activism. Accordingly, it is noteworthy that this chapter calls on us to recognise the social injustices raised by language hierarchy, and there are no separations between a grievable language, a grievable life and bodies. Besides, the end of the chapter also renders a hopeful paradigm for us to reimagine communication by unlearning linguistic essentialism.

Chapter 10 shifts its focus to teaching language, starting with some observations and introspections from the author’s teaching experience as a postgraduate module instructor for Language in a Globalised World. Moreover, the chapter discusses two forms of vulnerabilities in language teaching: personal and collective vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities, along with a pedagogy of discomfort, have resulted in decolonised epistemologies in an unexpected way that would reintroduce students and researchers to an unexpected path toward resilient and hopeful entanglements.

Focusing on the dilemma of language under the background of globalisation, drawing primarily on theories from history, politics, human geography, sociolinguistics and minority language, Khawla Badwan has offered a new multilayered and poly-directional narrative of language supported by personal experiences and interview data collected from academic sojourners. Among the highlights of the book, some deserve extra attention. First, this book fights for linguistic injustice and sheds more light on how linguistic justice can be fostered, which subverts normative thinking about language embedded in linguistic essentialism ideologies and leaves readers more space to reimagine language. Second, it attracts more people’s attention to language as a concern for social injustice, especially in school education, which paves the way for educators and academics to join hands to explore how language is related to social justice. Third, imposing a clear-cut structure on such diverse content is not easy. Therefore, at
the beginning and end of each chapter, the author summarises the content and raises questions for the following chapters, which helps readers form a coherent understanding. Lastly, it is worth noting that the author adopts different tones and styles in different chapters, which provide strong passions, allowing the reader to resonate with the author in feeling the pains and struggle of language and its speakers in the repressive normative framework of what is supposed to be taken for granted.

Overall, against the backdrop that English retains its status as lingua franca, it should be noted that the field of language and globalisation is still something of a work in progress. This book offers a comprehensive overview and unique perspectives of language in a globalised world from social justice perspectives, supporting ideas with interview data and personal experiences, and is thus a practical and timely guide to the field of multilingualism and sociolinguistics. With a reader-friendly and easy-to-understand writing style and thought-provoking discussion and questions, the book is much needed for novice and seasoned researchers in sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and education alike.

References


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