

SOCIOLINGUISTICS SYMPOSIUM 25

Curtin University
Perth, 24-27 June 2024



Nonmodern sociolinguistics: Intercepting the march of history and progress

Colloquium organiser: Jaspal Naveel Singh (The Open University)

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Recent drives to decolonise sociolinguistics often intertwine with ideologies of progress and innovation, and sometimes even with desires to undo colonial injustice by returning to a precolonial imaginary in which the world was still in good cosmic order. Paradoxically, decolonial sociolinguistics may therefore reproduce coloniality's temporal myth of modernity, understood as a linear march of (European) history. Merely framing our discipline as decolonial, while keeping our colonial-temporal methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies intact, may undermine any well-intended project of decolonisation. To not get trampled by the stampede of European history, or to not get crushed by the wheels of the universalising world clock - in other words, to not get devoured by Kronos/Chronos -, it seems important to imagine a decolonial sociolinguistics that is decisively nonmodern. The "nonmodern is a necessary concept to illuminate the coexistence of temporalities and modes of living and thinking that are neither premodern nor postmodern" (Mignolo 2018: 130). A nonmodern sociolinguistics must critically interrogate canonical concepts in our discipline, such as "sociolinguistic innovators", "NORMS", "language change" or "colonial lag", and begin to thoroughly theorise concepts like "stasis", "presencing", "being now", "non-linear co-temporality" and "pluriversal ordinariness". In this colloquium, we will collaborate to discuss what a nonmodern sociolinguistics might look like and how it can help to intercept modernity's myth of linear time. Both empirically grounded and southern theoretical studies are invited.

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1. Ontologies of Incompleteness, Convivial Scholarship: Alternative Pathways for Decolonising Our Field

Finex Ndhlovu (University of New England)

Methodologies, theories and traditions of knowing developed under the aegis of the 19th century colonial order are no longer fit for purpose: the job of giving us future-facing solutions to the challenges we face in language and society studies. For two reasons, colonially-inherited approaches are both historically and conceptually out of date: (a) they do not contain the necessary tools to capture, understand and analyse the whole world – notwithstanding pretensions of universal relevance; (b) they are beholden to colonial linguistics agendas that were in the service of imperial conquest, exploitation, and slavery (Reiter, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2021 & 2023). Colonially-inherited theories and methodologies must be decolonised because they often get in the way of thinking anew. How might we decolonise our field? What would alternative pathways to decolonise our project designs look like if we were to think, theorise and learn in partnership with communities of the Global South? I address these questions through drawing on the two innovative concepts of ‘ontologies of incompleteness’ and ‘convivial/frontier scholarship’ (Nyamnjoh, 2015 & 2017). I argue that to decolonise our field, there are at least three things that we must get right. First, we must recognise and value diverse geographies of knowledge – beyond the Euro-modernist colonial tradition of knowing. Second, we must commit to collaborating with scholars and communities immersed in the Global South as an entry point to the project of decolonising – not a situation where Northern scholars and institutions are sites for decolonial agenda setting. Third, we must seek out and value other (pre-colonial) libraries and knowledge archives of the Souths that survived colonial domination and epistemic violence. Our thinking must change if we are to approach the question of language in society more fruitfully.

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2. Blendings, Continua, and Nonmodern Sociolinguistics

Ari Sherris (Texas A&M University-Kingsville), Samua Mango Aworo (University of Education Winneba) and Eden Kosiaku (University of Education Winneba)

This paper represents the nonmodern in sociolinguistics as the blending of Western and Indigenous knowledges. It does this by exploring the representations of different continua such as familiar-unfamiliar, general-specific, concrete-abstract, analysis-synthesis, named-non-named, and fenced-unfenced. Rather than as “dichotomies or contradictory dualities (either/or)” (Mignolo 2018, p. 155) the continua are explored through a heuristics of the heart (Sherris, 2020) which is an emotional and cognitive blending of discourses and ways of being across community-based researchers who are friends and across their languaging on the tribal lands of the Safaliba people of Ghana who lead—in the nomenclature of the West, multilingual ethnolinguistic lives in a small Gur language spoken by—for the most part—subsistence farmers—nomenclature which we deconstruct. In this blending, which is also discussed beyond the conceptualizations of temporality, time is not an either/or construct of either the linear or the nonlinear; it is both at once, which we illustrate in ways that might support a more integrated discourse for educative contexts. In Western traditions, a construct that is both linear and nonlinear is at best a paradox, but often demarcated as mysticism and hence downgraded by Western science. For indigenous Safaliba belief systems this simply is being in the world, a mundane material reality, both the stasis and flux of nonlinear and linear continua of knowledge of the world and the world (Escobar, 2020), intelligible and as clear as day—sometimes separate, sometimes non-separate, and sometimes both at once. The paper does not attempt to universalize or particularize an approach to representing the nonmodern because as will become evident from different angles the approach may be, in part, like other approaches or unique, if one emphasizes different aspects, as in a Western case study approach. In language education, which is the field of all three authors (one born and raised in Empire USA; two born and raised on indigenous Safaliba lands), we explore what it means to be unique and to be alike from a blended perspective. We also explore with our students some ways representations of language education in our different contexts might benefit by such a blending as the interpenetrated/entangled ways of understanding language, culture, and community in a nonmodern sociolinguistic heuristics of the heart.

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3. Are AI Language Models Non-Modern? On Enlightenment Fantasies, Creole Practices and Imperialist Algorithmic Indifference

Britta Schneider (Europa University Viadrina)

In this talk, I discuss modern and non-modern concepts of language and of linguistic prestige in different cultural contexts, from European modernity to Belizean language culture to AI language models. I first talk about language concepts from modernist Enlightenment that have shaped Western thought on language, also in sociolinguistic fields. These include the idea that language is rule-based, has, above all, denotational functions, and that rule-based language is prestigious (Silverstein 2014). The sociolinguistic endeavour often follows these assumptions and supports an evolutionary idea in recognizing (constructing?) language rules in minority contexts. Thus, teleological concepts of language, a “trope of moving forward” (Mignolo 2018: 119), in which language is regarded as ‘naturally’ striving towards one norm (ideally represented in writing), have been not only hegemonic but also are part of many forms of language activism. In the second part of the talk, I introduce thoughts of Belizean Creole speakers who reject the idea of written standards and explicitly value creative language practices and shifting, unstable forms of denotation. This denaturalises modernist prestige formation. Thirdly, I compare this to discourses and practices in the context of generative AI language models. The development of AI language technologies is embedded in evolutionary, imperialist discourses on ‘helping’ non-Western communities to ‘move forward’ and have their language practices represented in digital genres. At the same time, there are aspects that do not fit into the modern linguistic paradigm. The logics of AI models implies non-rule based but data-based approaches to language and their aim is to gain access to as many datafied language practices as possible. There is no interest in the creation of a shared, single community norm but customised norms for single users are established, for example on smartphones (Schneider 2022). AI language generation is not based on an abstract concept of national language norms, but on statistical calculations of patterns in data. Users sometimes circumvent automatised recognition of their utterances by creatively changing patterns to produce what has been called 4LGO5p34K (Algospeak) (Klug, Steen, and Yurechko 2023). While the aim of surveying language practices of speakers worldwide is imperialist and embedded in modernist capitalist chronotopes, we observe a changing role of linguistic norms and possibly changing concepts of linguistic prestige. Destabilizing ideals of stable (national) norms of language, this may host non-modern potentials. What are emancipatory or restrictive elements in this? What do non-modern language concepts in AI mean for public democratic discourse? Does this epistemic reconstitution of language entail aspects that help us to engage “in forms of life that we like to preserve” (Mignolo 2018: 112)?

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4. Presentism as a Digital Language Ideology

Theresa Heyd (University of Greifswald)

The notion of *presentism* has recently captured the critical imagination of scholars studying digital language and culture. Presentism in this context refers to an ahistorical, often technologically determinist way of conceptualizing the digital, whether in affirmative ways or framed in cultural pessimism. These concepts often refer to a certain time logic, emphasizing not only the present as the experiential mode of social media (Kreuzmair et al. 2022), but also assumptions about radical societal innovation and change brought forth by digital practice. These presentist tendencies stretch well into the domain of digital linguistic practice. This includes ideologies of digital language and digital language change, including their enregisterment as radically different and distinctive ways of communicating (Squires 2010) and related continuations of the complaint tradition. At the same time, the tropes of timeflows also become apparent in the linguistic labels and registers used to talk *about* digital practice: digital work is framed as *agile*, information flows follow the rhythms of *updates*, digital innovations are *disruptions*, the very notion of digital culture is perched to become *postdigital*. In this talk, I will explore these language ideologies of digital timeflows and how they tie in to larger aspects of presentism in digital language and culture. In the context of the panel topic, I want to discuss how this specific perspective on the digital – a mode of communication conventionally framed as modern and recent – can be reframed and understood differently: in terms of *longue durée*, in potentially nonmodern terms.

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5. The Temporal Contradictions of Israeli Econationalist Rhetoric

Roey J. Gafter (*Ben-Gurion University of the Negev*) and Tommaso M. Milani (*The Pennsylvania State University*)

The aim of this paper is to analyze Israeli discourses about the land and their temporal contradictions in order to engage with this panel's encouragement to "intercept modernity's myth of linear time". While Zionism is a thoroughly modern ideology, forged in 19th century Europe and devoted to a Western notion of "progress", it draws its justification from the past, positing a timeless and unbroken link between the current Jewish Israeli population and the Biblical "Land of Israel" (*Eretz Yisrael*). Thus, Israel presents itself as a temporal contradiction – newer and more Modern than the rest of the Middle East, and yet also older and "timeless". This tension is particularly present in discourses of nature conservation. Israeli wildlife conservation efforts have been invested in restoring fauna considered to be native to the historical "Land of Israel" in Biblical times (Braverman, 2013). In this paper, we focus on the discourse surrounding the Nubian Ibex, a large goat indigenous to the deserts of the Middle East and Northeast Africa, which, according to a common narrative in Israel was hunted to near extinction in the early 20th century by Palestinians following the British introduction of firearms to the Middle East. However, due to the Israeli wildlife conservation activities, it returned to repopulate the land – a success commemorated in the ibex being adopted as the symbol of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. Against this backdrop, we draw upon Mignolo's "non-modern" approach, according to which "bringing the nonmodern to the foreground helps to understand the salvific narratives and the rhetoric (persuasion) of modernity" (2018: 117). More specifically, we illustrate the modernist underpinnings of Israeli narratives to save the Ibex from Palestinians. These are built on (1) the co-optation of the well-being of certain animals into the national ethos, thereby using them to justify Israel's actions, and (2) contradictory temporal moves. First, an association is drawn between indigenous non-human animals and the Jewish population, both allegedly "natural" features of the land. As the category of "nature" is often misconstrued as "outside of time" (Nusdat, 2020), this equivalence suggests Jewish Israelis are one with the natural biotope, rendering their presence there timeless and eternal. Conversely, Israeli conservation laws are presented as litmus test for progressive modernity, contrasting with the "retrograde" Palestinians, who are presented as simultaneously "newer" to the land but "backward" and therefore posing a threat to nature itself.

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6. Hip Hop's Ancient-Civilisation-Born-Again Imaginary

Jaspal Naveel Singh (The Open University)

When studying the transcultural flows of global hip hop, sociolinguistics have found that hip hop practitioners from around the world often imagine their culture as an “ancient civilisation born again” – to use the words of KRS One (2007). In this imaginary, hip hop is not only a musical genre or a subculture that originated *ex nihilo* in the post-industrial environments of racialised inner-city ghettos in the United States in the 1970s, but rather a more general human practice that had existed in various forms since the beginnings of civilisation; for example in the verbal performances of griots in Western Africa (Appert 2019), in the vocal percussion of medieval India (Singh and Campbell 2022), in the libation rituals of ancient Egypt (Bushay 2023), in Mayan ancestor revelation fire ceremonies (Barrett 2016), in Australian Aboriginal corroboree (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009) or in the Celtic folklore of Ireland (Rollefson 2022). Taking seriously hip hop's precolonial deep roots complexifies our understanding of contemporary globalised semiotic practices, which can now be recognised as both postmodern and premodern, as both as translocal and as already local. I argue that such layered simultaneity (Blommaert 2005) can best be theorised and analysed from a nonmodern sociolinguistic perspective. Nonmodernity rejects colonial modernity's fixation with placing each event on a linear and unidirectional timeline and instead calls for developing pluriversality, polycentricity and chronotopic complexity as central sociolinguistic methods.

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