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Applied Linguistics and the pressing need of the hour

Linguística Aplicada e a necessidade premente do momento

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Abstract: I argue in this paper that Linguistics can ill afford any more not to address the threat posed by burgeoning populist tendencies all over the world, coupled with the alarming spread of fake news and little regard for truth. We, researchers in the area of language, have a duty to intervene in the developing state of affairs with all that we can muster. If that means having to rethink our claims to be doing science and therefore be mere observers of the unfolding scenario lest we should be reneging on our oath to maintain value neutrality at any cost, then so be it.

Keywords: rising populism; fake news; critical linguistics; value neutrality; intervention.

Resumo: Neste trabalho, procuro sustentar que não podemos mais nos furtar de encarar a ameaça representada pelo surgimento das tendências populistas mundo afora, junto com a proliferação alarmante de ‘fake news’ sem nenhuma preocupação com a verdade. Nós, pesquisadores no campo da linguagem, temos o dever de intervir no estado de coisas ao nosso redor com tudo que está ao nosso dispor. Se isso significar que teremos que rever a nossa pretensão de estarmos fazendo ciência e, portanto a obrigação de sermos meros observadores dos acontecimentos sob o perigo de estarmos renegando o nosso juramento de manter-nos fieis ao princípio de neutralidade a qualquer custo, assim seja.

Palavras-chave: populismo crescente; fake news; linguística crítica; neutralidade científica; intervenção.

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Setting the stage

Almost every generation has some critical moment or another during its life-span when an eerie and rather disorienting sensation of being at a crossroads in history strikes home with special poignancy. That turn of phrase ‘being at a crossroads in history’ may itself seem all too overused and hackneyed to cause any new jitters. But the fact of the matter is that the grave crisis of epic proportions that many nations and individuals are going through as we ponder this issue right now is so unprecedented and unlike anything else we have seen before—and certainly not at the gigantic scale at which we are witnessing it today—that there can be no doubt whatsoever about one thing: one stands to risk one’s whole future and that of generations to come by opting to remain nonchalantly blasé about it or play possum.

The crossroads that I am referring to has to do with the widespread sense of disbelief and suspicion of the very foundation of the system of democratic governance that took literally hundreds of years to be sculpted into a workable (albeit far from ideal) machinery. Scepticism regarding its basic and guiding principles is rampant in the society at large and those who aid and abet it come from all walks of life, many of them blissfully unaware of the occult but carefully orchestrated schemes conspiring to manipulate things, stoking general discontent with a view to furthering their covert agendas. Ours is a generation that likes to think of itself as always well-informed and up-to-date with everything going on the world, but sadly most of our sources of information today are social networks, often of dubious provenance. But more and more amongst us are happy to feed off whatever is supplied to them, especially if it helps shore up our already-formed convictions or, rather, ‘convictions’ that have already been made for us by the powers that be!

As populist tendencies germinate and mushroom across the world and people rush to polling stations to elect individuals they readily recognise as brash and amateurish but, in what they see as the desirable quality of being “unencumbered” by the customary nefarious practices of their predecessors to assume the reins of power, many are also calling into doubt the very legitimacy and trustworthiness of the two co-equal pillars of very institution of democracy, namely, the legislative and the judiciary branches. What many of these die-hard enthusiasts don’t realise is that they are taking a short-cut to authoritarian rule, once they help remove the checks and balances that were put in place by the wise savants of the past precisely in order to prevent it.

The question that we need to raise in the face of the impending calamity is: what can we, as academics interested in the phenomenon of language and its attendant circumstances, do about it? Doesn’t the rather dismal and sordid state of affairs thumb-nailed above rightfully belong to areas of academic expertise such as political science, public governance, ethics, mass psychology and so forth? If so, in what way can a linguist or a rhetorician or a literary critic hope to bring the weight of their accumulated wisdom to bear on recent events that have already begun to sound ominous alarm bells?

The short and simple answer to the doubts ventilated in the question posed above can only be on the thing. It is that we linguists and others who are interested in and concerned with language in whatever shape or form have a lot to contribute to the ongoing discussion that is already taking place (albeit, in my view, in an as-yet timid and unenthusiastic fashion). Before everything else, let us agree on one thing: What is happening around the globe is in many senses nothing short of mob hysteria. And it is

not for nothing that the mob has been likened to an ass and in Shakespeare’s memorable words, “will as tenderly be led by th’ nose/ As asses are.” (Othello, I.iii.). In other words, in every case of precipitated mob reaction, there invariably is some carefully orchestrated manipulation through the deft use of rhetoric designed to beguile already gullible minds. Although sociologists and psychologists may be better equipped to characterise the root causes and the social ramifications of people reacting on the basis of their gut feelings rather than reasoned judgment, we linguists also have a reason—nay, a duty—to step in because all these things happen in and through language. We may not be in a position to suggest appropriate remedial actions to stem the vile trends or curtail their baleful consequences, but we can help detect their early symptoms and, in so doing, suggest possible ways to contain if not eliminate them.

The indispensable need for critical thinking

The proliferation of fake news and planted stories and reports being maliciously propagated on the internet makes it imperative that we sift through what is being ladled out and be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. This is by no means an easy task. The sheer number of people who fall victim to it is ample evidence of the capacity of fake news to impact events of such magnitude as national elections (the case of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election) and plebiscites designed to re-draw geo-political maps (as in the Brexit referendum the same year). The pivot to Radical Right in the US, Europe and its copycat replicas in Asia, Africa and Latin America is clear evidence that people right across the world are today moved by an inexplicable *Weltschmerz* which has been adroitly channelled and exploited by demagogues and other opportunists into political action that foments chest-pounding nationalism, hatred of foreigners, especially immigrants, and a desire to gag and, if possible, eliminate minorities based on their religious beliefs or sexual orientation or ethnicity or whatever:

Most of us, especially those among us, who went through our early literacy in a pre-digital world, where writing meant a rare achievement and the printed word commanded all respect, are easily prone to be duped by disinformation and other hoaxes and all too easily are enticed by clickbait stories passing off as bonafide news reports. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that these fabricated stories are passed on through social media, thus bestowing upon them an added appearance of ‘authenticity’ or ‘trustworthiness’ if only the simple reason that they were redirected to your mail box by persons you have no reason otherwise to hold in suspicion. In other words, ordinary well-meaning people get into the frenzy of unwittingly serving as cogs in a gigantic machinery of propaganda designed to unleash panic reaction.

Redefining research on matters linguistic

If it is the case that, as I argued in the foregoing paragraphs, we linguistics have the need and—more importantly, the obligation—to bring the weight of our specialised knowledge to bear on what is happening around the world, why is it that there is still some resistance on the part of some amongst us to throw down the gauntlet and jump into the fray?

The only ready answer to this question that I can think of is that many of us still toil under some misgiving about our real capacity to do so, a misgiving that can be traced back to the very origins of Linguistics as a discipline in its own right. Ever since its inception, the early forefathers of our discipline were unanimous in highlighting the scientific nature of the enterprise. Part at least of what science meant for them was the idea of value-neutrality which in turn meant a resolute unwillingness to take sides, let alone voice our personal preferences, lest that should veer us off our chosen path of Reason which alone should be the loadstar of everything we do in the name of science.

But value-neutrality often amounts to complacency and, in the worst case scenario, to outright complicity with the state of affairs one is confronted with in the real world. This has notoriously been one excruciating dilemma that early sociolinguists have had to face in one form or another. Either they sit back and content themselves with describing how things are (including the atrocities that certain segments of the population are routinely subjected to) and pay the price for not doing anything about it or do some militancy on behalf of those who they perceive to be on the seamy side of things and risk being branded a traitor to the cause of Science!

It is perhaps important to note here that sociolinguists were not alone in being caught up in this dilemma. Even Applied Linguistics, a discipline that came into being with the battle-cry of attending to the problems of the real world, witnessed some of its early practitioners be drawn towards the claims of being scientific and rejoice in the prestige that it bestowed upon them. Thus Rampton (1995, p. 235) registers with understandable disbelief and resentment that “[r]esearch in SLA (second language research) is [often] regarded as objective and essentially neutral politically” and cites as evidence for his remark the collection of papers assembled in the special issue, vol. 14 no. 3, the journal *Applied Linguistics* published two years earlier and entirely devoted to the topic. Anyway, the important takeaway from all this is this: Such is the lure of science that it is all too easy to fall victim to its Siren song.

But, over time, the situation has changed dramatically, and, luckily one should add, for the better. There seems to be a consensus building up amongst field researchers that it just not enough for them to show sympathy or empathy for those that formed the target group of their research activities. In addition, they need speak up on their behalf and, if need be, engage in open militancy in order to achieve their goals. In other words, socially conscious and responsible researchers ought to fight for the legitimate grievances of those living in precarious conditions—the very conditions that were what they devoted all their energies to explore and analyse. The real work for the linguist begins after they have come to grips with the reality they encounter—after they have explored, analysed and explained its whys and wherefores. What they do after all this by way of ameliorating the situation is what makes the difference between a socially responsible linguist and one who would rather bury their head in the sand!

Unfortunately, as already alluded to above, many well-meaning linguists often feel that their hands are tied in this respect. Their hands seem tied because strict adhere to one of their founding principles would appear to dictate that they stay clear of anything and everything that smacks of taking sides on issues, especially those of a political nature. As scientists we have been given to constantly reminding ourselves that we ought to restrict ourselves to *describing* how things are; never taking the additional step of *prescribing* how we think they ought to be. In philosophy, this injunction is referred

to as the ‘fact-value gap’ and, often facetiously, as ‘Hume’s guillotine’ (so-called in deference to Hume (1739), who originally came up with the idea).

Alongside the insistence on the scientific nature of our enquiry, the early pioneers of our discipline were also eager to claim exclusive rights to emit opinions on what language is, how it should be taught etc. In fact, they often spoke as if they had monopoly over anything that had to do with language. As I argued in my 2004 book (Silva and Rajagopalan, 2004), linguists are given to crying foul every time they find themselves, as they often in fact are, slighted or unceremoniously bypassed in public debates over language, but are also given to sitting back and sulking like Achilles in his tent.

But the idea itself that, in order to be able to do anything that has to do with language with any amount of success, one has to either take some lessons in linguistics or take the advice of professional linguists is as old as the discipline itself, at least in its modern, ‘scientific’ sense. Witness what Leonard Bloomfield, hailed by many as the founder of modern, structural linguistics had to say, in his inaugural address to the newly founded Linguistic Society of America, about what he perceived as the failure of schools to face up to the challenge of teaching young children:

Our schools are conducted by persons who, from professors of education down to teachers in the classroom, know nothing of the results of linguistic science, not even the relation of writing to speech or of standard language to dialect. In short, they do not know what language is, and yet must teach it and in consequence waste years of every child’s life and reach a poor result. (Bloomfield, 1970, p. 112)

Simply put, Bloomfield is saying one does not know what language is until and unless one has had some familiarity with the teaching of modern, scientific linguistics. In effect, then, he simply refuses to recognize that there are other ways of contemplating language over and above the linguist’s. And assumes further that the linguist must be recognized as the sole custodian—some sort of a Knight Templar—of all that is scientifically true about language.

The overwhelming view held by Applied Linguists right across the world today is that what the theoretical linguist has to say has only limited relevance when it comes to rolling up one’s sleeves and engaging in activities that involve language such as language teaching. As Auerbach (1995, p. 9) so powerfully exclaimed way back in the mid 1990s,

Close your eyes and imagine an ESL [English as a Second Language] classroom. My guess is that the picture in your mind’s eye includes a teacher, a group of learners, some desks, chairs, a blackboard, books, papers, four walls, and a door. Has your dream anything outside the walls of the classroom? Are there any visible ways in which relations of power or authority show up in your picture?

2.2. Fact-value distinction and how it hamstrings the linguist

Ever since its inception as a field of independent inquiry, distancing itself from the broader field of semiotics on the one hand and traditional grammar on the other (the latter often serving as

the linguist's favourite punching bag!), linguistics has been eager to present itself as a scientific field of inquiry. And linguists have seldom missed an opportunity to compare themselves with scientists of unquestionable prestige, notably those doing so-called 'hard' sciences, to wit, physics, chemistry, biology and so forth. Thus it does not take a great deal of effort to sift through the vast volume of research produced in, say, the last three or four decades to come across attempts to compare phonology or semantics to chemistry, physics, biology and so on, all widely credited with being hard sciences of impeccable lineage. In his classic paper 'Linguistics as chemistry,' Zwicky (1973, p. 467) waxes eloquent at the very outset. Among the aims of the paper that he proudly sets out is one that figures prominently and it is the following: "[...] to place theoretical principles in linguistics in a larger framework, in particular, to note similarities between linguistics and various natural sciences (not only chemistry, but also physics and biology) [...]".

And he winds up the discussion in the same celebratory note:

The analogy between linguistic and biological classification is a systematic one: in most respects, there is a point-to-point correspondence between the two fields. The claim made in this paper is that the the correspondence between semantic and chemical structure are of the same sort. (Zwicky, 1973, p. 483)

As for the 'softer' sciences—sociology, psychology, anthropology and the like—many hard-nosed linguists have by and large evinced an ambivalent attitude, preferring to treat them as at best peripheral or at best auxiliary to their own 'full-blooded' scientific enquiries. That the idea of science that most linguists have held dear to their hearts is that derived from the natural and exact sciences is evident from an early exposition by, once again, Bloomfield. This is what he said in an address to the Modern language Association of America, on December 30, 1929 (cf. Bloomfield, 1930, p. 553):

I believe that in the near future – in the next few generations, let us say – linguistics will be one of the main sectors of scientific advance, and in this sector science will win through to the understanding and control of human conduct.

And he goes to add: "in the domains of physics and biology science has for some time been working with success and has given great power".

The idea of the success of a science through the "understanding control of human conduct" may bring to us, endowed as we are with some hindsight, unwelcome shudders, especially as we recall that this was precisely what the authorities sought to do in Nazi Germany, as evident from an article that appeared in the journal *Nature* in the year 1934 (Science and the Nazis, 1934, p. 941). Here is a quote from the abstract of that paper that proves the point:

Germany's latest regulation affecting scientific inquiry may be the logical consequence of principles accepted in that country, but is none the less curious. Herr Julius Streicher's deputy, according to a correspondent in the *Times* of June 13, has issued an order prohibiting scientific lectures on racial questions, since they have a "diluting and distorting effect on the Nazi *Weltanschauung*". Professional men of science, it is added, are not equipped with the

necessary knowledge and honest conviction and their lectures are, therefore, a danger to the true Nazi creed.

The point that I am eager to press home here is that so long as we take such a high-falutin' attitude to science and its authority over and above every other forms of knowledge, we run the risk of stonewalling real concerns that ordinary folks of flesh and blood have. This is especially the case with fields of knowledge such as linguistics where what is at issue is something that is so dear to men and women—the language they speak, something about which they invariably have and are fully entitled to have their own views, most probably passed on to them by folk wisdom or community elders.

2.3. Linguistics as a Social Science and its humanistic bearings

It was remarked above that linguistics has had to pay a heavy price when it came to justifying its social relevance (or, in some cases, total absence thereof) thanks to its insistence on claiming to be science on all fours and, as we saw in the quote from Zwicky (1973), on a par with such 'robust' sciences as physics and chemistry. But this is not the only way to look at science in general, nor, for that matter, linguistics in particular. Unfortunately, many among us are still wedded to the idea that being scientific means aping the hard sciences, whether or not their object of study lends itself to such an approach. In this context, the following words by Robin Lakoff in a paper she wrote way back in 1989 should serve as a stark reminder of what is really at stake:

I see this as the major, unaskable, festering question: Is linguistics a science? If not, what happens? Before you clench those muscles in your jaws, consider awhile: Do you want our field to be a 'science' because that name makes our enterprise feel prestigious or worthwhile or are these really justifications? (Lakoff, 1989, p. 984)

Lakoff (1989) wrote that text in the spirit of someone reminiscing about a tumultuous period in US linguistics, more specifically within the Generative camp, riven at that time by a noisy and bruising controversy, referred to in the literature as a 'civil war' between two faction of heavy-weights over the issue of what role to assign to semantics in grammar. Needless to say, her words have all the hallmarks of someone trying to get her pent-up feelings off her chest. But that does not detract from the fact that she is pointing to something that it should behoove us to be asking ourselves every now and then.

But then, the question that we need to ask ourselves is this: is simply forsaking our claims to be doing a 'hard' science and instead claiming that we are happy doing a 'soft' one, say, a 'social' science enough to make things any better? The answer should be a resounding NO. As Cameron *et al.* (1993, p. 89) wrote a few years after Lakoff wrote hers, "social science is a major contributor to oppressive regimes of truth" and, rather unexpectedly, goes on add: "perhaps, then, empowering research is a contradiction in terms." In part this has to do with the fact that many so-called 'social scientists' prefer to steer clear of existing social hierarchies and go about their business as if such hierarchies simply didn't exist or could jolly well be consigned to the margins. But they do make their existence matter

and skew the results of scientific enquiry at moments one least expects it to happen. As Howard (2012, p. 341) has remarked,

An infinite range of status hierarchies fit within the rubric of ‘social hierarchy,’ which refers to any differential value that is assigned to people, their roles and identities, or even their linguistic resources. [...] Learning about hierarchy and how it is marked is a critical aspect of both language acquisition and social development throughout life. *Furthermore, the practices of hierarchy are central to the production and/or contestation of social inequality in social field and institutions such as peer groups, families, schools, workplaces, professions, and even nations or societies.* (italics added)

And also such pretentiously uneven relationships as teacher/student and researcher/informant, she might have added.

This is exactly the point Cameron and her co-authors are alluding to. It is a very serious one and calls for closer scrutiny. As they note at the very outset of their paper referred to earlier,

Typically, research produces or intensifies an unequal relationship between investigator and informants: authority and control lie with the investigator more often than with the informants and whole process benefits the investigator much more than the informants. (Cameron *et al.*, 1993, p. 81)

And they proceed to ask: “Why is this so? Is it inevitable?” This of course is a rhetorical question. Contrary to their own misgivings on this issue, the authors do, implicitly, at least, recognise that there are ways of doing research and engaging with the public that can turn out to be more liberatory, more empowering. But, in order for this to happen, there is a need for a couple of first steps to be taken. To begin with, we, as researchers, need to come down from the lofty perches of our ivory towers to the earth below and mingle with our informants and share their anxieties and comprehend and partake of their grievances. As the authors under discussion point out, “[...] human meanings—for positivists, a realm of the subjective—are for us at least partly constitutive of what a given reality *is*.”

Meanings are not language external objects out there in the real world, up for grabs for the neo-positivistically oriented linguistic to harvest and later dissect at their sweet will and pleasure. Meanings are man-made and human meanings are created in genuine interactions between equal partners in a common and collective endeavour to make sense of things.

The need for critical engagement

It is at this juncture that the urgent need for a critical outlook becomes evident. For there to be effective and productive engagement with our informants or, for that matter, with the public at large out there, we need to arm ourselves with a disposition to mingle with the “hoi polloi,” feel their feelings and sentiments and make things happen (or, at the very least, not stand in the way of things unfolding by their own internal logics) rather than go on being content, as were traditionally told to, with merely observing things, recording our findings and eventually analysing and explaining things to our heart’s

content (and rejoicing in our own ingenuity in doing so)—all in strict conformity with the playbook of a science erected on neo-positivistic premises.

Another name for successfully breaking loose from the shackles of past ‘scientific’ practices that only served to limit our freedom to take the initiative by forcing us into a methodological straitjacket is embracing a critical attitude to the work we do. And this in turn implies a readiness to *intervene* in the way things are. It means a willingness to actively promote a positive agenda, and, in the process, stem negative ones.

There is no shortage of negative agendas staring us in the face right now, as we saw at the beginning of this paper. Ideologically troublesome propositions are being flouted around all too frequently. And, as it fits all ideologically motivated agendas, those who promote such agendas are the first to decry ideology in what they wish to attack, while pretending that their own carefully choreographed outcries are anything but. Thus, without any qualms whatsoever, they can decree that the Nazi ideology was quintessentially a leftist one in the hope that, in this latter-day version of a Newspeak being inaugurated, a lie told time and time again may begin to pass for a truth. It says so in the expanded version of its own self-anointed appellation: ‘National Socialism’ (*Nationalsozialismus*, in German).

In an excellent paper in which she makes a case for the aesthetic in our way of doing fieldwork, Pratt (2018, p. 25) brings her thoughts to a close with the following words which I quote in their entirety below:

To be a sociolinguist is to interact constantly with the aesthetic. It is to know the way conversation is a dance and oratory is song. It means being trained to recognize musicality, rhythmic back and forths, dissonance and interruption, changes of key in the play of living speech. It is to know that in any speech situation, there are enormous social stakes in voice, register, repertoire, timing, pacing, orchestration of turns; to know that linguistic exchanges are saturated by the micropolitics of style – that variation can be a quickstep or a duel, a choreography of risk across whatever social map is in play. My questions here have been: How can the aesthetic and the performative be incorporated explicitly and systematically into sociolinguistic analysis? Is this not essential to explicating the way language works in the world?

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