Alastair Pennycook
Chapter 9
Reassembling linguistics:
Semiotic and epistemic assemblages

1 Introduction

This paper makes two arguments in relation to linguistics and assemblages. The first concerns a framing of social semiotics that eschews assumptions about languages as structural entities, and focuses instead on the spatial gathering of linguistic resources and other material elements. A focus on semiotic assemblages reconfigures what counts as language and how social, spatial and material worlds interact. This understanding of assemblages as entangled groupings of different elements allows for an appreciation of the ways in which different trajectories of people, semiotic resources and objects meet at particular moments and places. The notion of semiotic assemblages opens up alternative ways of thinking that focus not so much on language use in particular contexts – as if languages preexist their instantiation in particular places – but rather on the ways in which particular assemblages of objects, linguistic resources and places come together.

To enable this kind of rethinking, we need an approach to language other than that provided by conventional linguistic disciplines. The second focus on assemblages is therefore concerned with questions of disciplinary knowledge. Rather than looking at linguistics or socio- and applied linguistics[1] in interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary terms (which retain some aspects of disciplinary constraints), it is more productive to view them as temporary assemblages of thought and action that come together at particular moments when language-related concerns need to be addressed. This flexible account of (applied) linguistic practices focuses on epistemic assemblages as a conjunction of language-oriented projects (research where language, broadly understood, is a central concern), epistemes

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[1] I focus in this paper mainly on socio- and applied linguistics (or applied sociolinguistics), but I see this discussion as applying generally across the domains of linguistics, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, a field that has been unhelpfully broken up into these overlapping subfields.

Alastair Pennycook, University of Technology Sydney, Alastair.Pennycook@uts.edu.au

(comprehensive concepts that cut across the humanities and social sciences) and matters of concern (things that matter socially and politically). Put together, these two forms of assemblage-related thinking create a space for reassembling linguistics as a field open to wide-ranging epistemological approaches to a variety of ontological dispositions on language.

2 Rethinking the scope of language

A number of recent approaches to socio- and applied linguistics have taken up, in various forms and with various terminologies (Pennycook 2016), the notion of translinguistic practices (e.g., Li Wei 2018), which as Canagarajah (2013: 6) explains, implies an understanding not only that "communication transcends individual languages" (we use repertoires of linguistic resources without necessary recourse to the notions of languages), but also that "communication transcends words and involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances" (we draw on a wide set of possible resources to achieve communication). Here, then, we have two contemporary challenges to more conventional approaches to language: one questioning the status of languages, as identifiable and separable systems; the other questioning the status of language, as an identifiable and stable set of linguistic resources.

The tensions that this reorientation produces can be seen across many fields of linguistic analysis, a good example being the emergent field of linguistic landscape research, where studies may vary from statistical analysis of identifiable languages in the public space to qualitative studies of spatial semiotics with no mention of languages at all. Some studies continue to pursue the original focus on the first term – linguistic – concerning themselves mainly with signage containing written text. From this perspective, the "linguistic" refers principally to named languages (languages that can be identified as distinct from others), as well as language varieties and aspects of style (scripts, fonts, design), while the "landscape" is the public space in which these signs occur. While the first aspect of a translinguistic perspective (beyond individual languages) has also influenced this research focus on identifiable languages written on signs – suggesting the need for "a holistic view that goes beyond the analysis of individual signs as monolingual or multilingual" (Gorter and Cenoz 2015: 63) – the key interest in many of these studies remains "the presence, representation, meanings and interpretation of languages displayed in public places" (Shohamy and Ben-Rafael 2015: 1). Although translingual questions may be raised about the extent to which languages can be easily distinguished (and especially the extent to which

language items can be convincingly counted or their relative salience can be represented numerically), the idea of "language" remains more or less stable.

A second, emergent trajectory, however, takes up the other aspect of the translinguistic focus (beyond language), making the landscape the primary focus and asking how such material spaces can be viewed in semiotic terms. The distinction rests in part on what we take to comprise a text, or, more broadly, language. An expansive semiotic perspective might include sensory landscapes such as smellscapes (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015b), pointing to the role that smell may play in the interpretation of place – particularly in its interpellative and associational capacities – without drawing any potential relations between smells and languages. A focus on bikescapes (Pennycook 2019) draws attention to the role of bikes within urban semiotics, as material discourse markers and sites of struggle over the regulation of public and private space. Reversing the priorities of the first framework, this perspective focuses on the landscape itself (urban transport, for example), making the interpretive act rather than intentionality central (how we read rather than how we write the landscape), and potentially eschewing any reference to named languages (focusing on semiotic resources, such as tattoos, graffiti, bikes and smells; Karlander 2018; Peck and Stroud 2015; Pennycook 2010).

This second focus, then, with its interest in space and semiotics, is concerned with the landscape as a set of signs, where landscape is foreground rather than background, signs are semiotic items rather than forms of public signage, and the term "language," if it is used, may be an umbrella term for social semiotics rather than referring to particular linguistic varieties. For some, this focus on semiotic texts can still be contained within a notion of linguistic landscapes (LL), which may include "images, photos, sounds (soundscapes), movements, music, smells (smellscapes), graffiti, clothes, food, buildings, history, as well as people who are immersed and absorbed in spaces by interacting with LL in different ways" (Shohamy 2015: 153–154). For others, by contrast, it may be more useful to consider such broad approaches in terms of semiotic landscapes (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010), leaving the notion of linguistic for a more select set of written texts that can be more easily described as language.

This uncertainty over the scope of linguistic landscapes is a product of the current push to reconfigure what counts as language and how social, spatial and material worlds interact. A range of related terms – conjunctural analysis (Varis 2017), entanglements (Toohey et al. 2015; Kerfoot and Hyltenstam 2017) or assemblages (Canagarajah 2018; Pennycook 2017) – have been taken up to account for the ways that multiple material and semiotic elements combine at particular moments. The notion of assemblages as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts" (Bennett 2010: 23) allows for an understanding of how people, semiotic resources and objects on different trajectories coalesce at

particular conjunctures. Just as the social semiotic approach to linguistic land-scapes reverses the focus of research, an assemblage approach shifts attention away from language use in particular contexts – as if languages are already-given systems that can be deployed in different places – in favour of an approach to the ways in which particular assemblages of objects, linguistic resources and places come together.

3 Semiotic assemblages

In a series of studies of Bangladeshi-owned corner shops in Tokyo and Sydney (Pennycook and Otsuji 2017, 2019), we have developed the idea of semiotic as-semblages to account for the complexity of interacting factors. This gives us a way to address the intricacy of things that conjoin in the vibrant exchanges of everyday urban life. Asking the question "Where is language?" – a question that may make little sense to the mainstream of language studies – Finnegan (2015) suggests that the "cognitive language-centred model of the nature and destiny of humanity" with its focus on language in the mind misses so much that matters, including not only many other cultural modes such as music, dance and drama, but also "the gestural, pictorial, sculptural, sonic, tactile, bodily, affective and artefactual dimensions of human life" (p. 18). To arrive at a better understanding of the multilingual, multimodal and multisensorial interactions in these shops, it has been useful to think of language not as something residing in the head, but as a set of distributed resources that come together in particular and momentary constellations.

The related notion of spatial repertoires (Canagarajah 2018; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015a) pushes language outside the head, not merely as a social resource but also as a spatial and artefactual one. From this perspective, the material surrounds are understood not only as a context in which we interact, but rather as part of an interactive whole that includes people, objects and space through a focus on "how the composite ecology of human and nonhuman interactions in public space works on sociality and political orientation" (Amin 2015: 239). From this point of view, there is a strong focus on both practices – those re-peated social and material acts that have gained sufficient stability over time to reproduce themselves – and on "the vast spillage of things" which are given equal weight to other actors and become "part of hybrid assemblages: concre-tions, settings and flows" (Thrift 2007: 9). Thinking along these lines, "the human is not approached as an autonomous agent, but is located within an ex-tensive system of relations" (Ferrando 2013: 32). Thrift (2007: 8) talks of a

"material schematism in which the world is made up of all kinds of things brought into relation with one another by many and various spaces though a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter."

Bennett (2010: 6) is likewise interested in thing-power: "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle," and the ways these things come together in assemblages. The idea is developed from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), who focus on an "assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another" as well as a "collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies" (1987: 88). For Deleuze and Guattari, the notion of assemblages addresses the need to combine qualities of both stasis and change together in any understanding of the properties of a thing. Their concern was to develop an understanding of assemblages as "concrete collections of heterogeneous materials that display tendencies towards both stability and change" (Adkins 2015: 14). Although their work is often seen as emphasizing change – ideas such as "becoming" have been widely taken up – it is important to see that this was part of an argument against an overemphasis on the stability of things and, indeed, of languages as systems. Notions of fixity and fluidity have to be taken together, therefore: We may appear from some perspectives to live in a world of fixity, yet fluidity is always at play; or from other perspectives we may appear to be surrounded by fluidity though this is always in relation to forms of fixity (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010).

In our studies of Bangladeshi corner shops, we focused therefore not only on the diverse linguistic resources that were inevitably at play – in the Tokyo store, it was common to use Bangla, English, Japanese, Hindi and Urdu among other languages (French, Uzbek and Moroccan Arabic turned up recently; Pennycook and Otsuji 2019, in press) – but also on what we came to call "assembling artefacts." These were typically items such as imported riverine fish, spice and rice, or locally grown (and slightly different) vegetables (onions and bitter melon), as well as items such as mobile phones and SIM cards. When these objects encounter the variable affordances of these different shops, they enter into new and momentary sets of relationships within semiotic assemblages. Such objects need to be taken very seriously as part of the action. Assembling artefacts such as fish draw the attention of customers to the freezers where they are stored, and to discussions of bones, taste, size and "cleanliness" (whether they have been gutted and scaled). Central to our studies has been the way objects such as fish and phone cards are part of assemblages of material and semiotic resources as customers, goods and languages assemble and disassemble at particular moments. This has implications for how we understand the role of objects in social semiotics as part of a critical sociolinguistics of diversity.

Assemblages describe the way things are brought together and function in new ways, and provide a way of thinking about "distributive agency" (Bennett 2010: 21), which links usefully to the notions of distributed language and cognition: Neither agency nor language nor cognition is best understood as a property of the individual, as something located in the human mind or tied to personal action; rather it is a distributed effect of a range of interacting objects, people and places. Assemblages can therefore be seen as "temporary arrangements of many kinds of monads, actants, molecules, and other dynamic 'dividuals' in an endless, nonhierarchical array of shifting associations of varying degrees of durability" (Appadurai 2015: 221). This turns the focus towards "the effects of relational interactions and assemblages, in various kinds of more-than-human networks entangled with one another, that may be messy and incoherent, spread across time and space" (Fenwick and Edwards 2011: 712). With their "uneven topographies" (Bennett 2010: 24), assemblages are not centrally governed by one material or event: "The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone." Assemblages describe the way things are brought together and function in new ways, and provide a way of thinking about how agency, cognition, identity and language can all be understood as distributed beyond any supposed human centre.

This is important not just for the sake of accomplishing better and more complete linguistic ethnographies but also to redress an historical imbalance that has placed language and cognition in the head, while relegating the body and the senses to the physical. Recent shifts to encompass an understanding of the body, senses and things have brought much greater attention to "touches, sights, smells, movements, material artefacts" and "shared experiences, dynamic interactions and bodily engagements" to go beyond the narrow story of cognition and language in the head (Finnegan 2015: 19). Although sociolinguistics has been better than its logocentric linguistic cousin in acknowledging various roles for the body – studies of nonverbal communication, for example – the body has often been conceived as "secondary to language rather than as the sine qua non of language" (Bucholtz and Hall 2016: 174). In their call for "an embodied sociocultural linguistics" (2016: 174), Bucholtz and Hall argue not only for making more salient bodily aspects of communication commonly acknowledged but often peripheralized, such as voice ("the embodied heart of spoken language" [2016: 178]) or style (where clothing, posture and attitude may do a lot of the work of enregisterment), but also for understanding how the body is discursively constructed, and how recent thinking has sought to understand how the body is "imbricated in complex arrangements that include nonhuman as well as human participants, whether animals, epidemics, objects, or

technologies" (2016: 186). It is to describe these "complex arrangements" (or entanglements) that the idea of semiotic assemblages has proved useful.

The notions of distributed language, cognition, agency and identity (Pennycook and Otsuji in press) allow us to see how these are produced in material webs of human and nonhuman assemblages. Looking at language in these terms helps us see that meaning emerges from interaction. Rather than considering linguistic repertoires as internalised individual competence or as the property of an imagined community, the notion of a semiotic assemblage expands the semiotic inventory and relocates repertoires in the dynamic relations among objects, places and linguistic resources, an emergent property deriving from the interactions between people, artefacts and space. Extending the notion of a nexus of practice as a "semiotic ecosystem" (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 89) – where "historical trajectories of people, places, discourse, ideas, and objects come together" (p. 159) and the focus is on "moments of action rather than on abstractable structures such as cultures and languages" (Scollon and Scollon 2007: 620) – it is possible to start to think about how all these items come together in any one moment. This focus on the moment – on "moments of action" (Scollon and Scollon 2007: 620), on "spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances" (Li Wei 2011: 1224), on "temporary arrangements" (Appadurai 2015: 221) – emphasizes the transitory nature of assemblages.

The notion of semiotic assemblages thus allows for an understanding of how different trajectories of people, semiotic resources and objects meet at particular moments and places. In addition to the understanding of the vibrancy of matter, the importance of things (particularly, the products bought and sold in the shops we studied) and the significance of place as more than just the geographical context in which language happens, we can start to see how linguistic resources are part of the action, part of the material, social and economic processes involved in an assemblage. The interest here is not so much in the identification of an assemblage (to give a name to a particular assemblage) but in an understanding of the momentary material and semiotic resources that intersect at a given place and time. Akin to Li Wei's (2011: 1224) moment analysis, the focus here is not so much on establishing patterns of linguistic use (genres, stages of interaction, and so on) but on understanding the relation between social practices in place and the constellations of objects, people and linguistic resources that come to matter at a particular moment.

4 Beyond interdisciplinary linguistics

Although applied linguistics has been subjected to the same kind of disciplinary mechanisms as many other disciplines – handbooks, introductory texts, symposia, and the like, all trying hard to make the case for disciplinary cohesion – there has never been a compelling case to consider it a discipline. It has always been difficult to nail down what applied linguistics really is. For some, it is a field of practice informed by real-world language problems, so applied linguists are "practical people working as a community, and it is their modes of practice and communicating with one another, as much as anything, which define them as a professional group" (McCarthy 2001: 118). For others, applied linguistics is better understood as a theory of the practice, suggesting that applied linguistics is "the practice of language study itself, and the theory that could be drawn from that practice" (Kramsch 2015: 455). For others, it is an "interdisciplinary area of inquiry" where research on language-related issues meets wider public concerns (Rampton 1997: 11).

A lot of work has nonetheless been done over the years to consolidate applied linguistics as a discipline, perhaps suggesting a field desperately trying to convince itself and others of its disciplinary status. A revealing part of this process has been not only what is placed within the fold of applied linguistics – from early concerns with language teaching (and particularly of English) to a wider smorgasbord of interests such as translation, speech pathology, multilingual families, language policies, language maintenance, language in professional contexts, and more – but also what is kept out. In his preface to *The Oxford handbook of applied linguistics*, for example, Kaplan (2002) explains how critical applied linguistics (Pennycook 2001) was not included because of its supposed rejection of theories of language, scepticism towards metanarratives, and critique of traditional applied linguistic claims to neutrality. Davies' (1999: 145) *An introduction to applied linguistics* likewise warns of the threat of critical applied linguistics as "a judgemental approach by some applied linguists to 'normal' applied linguistics on the grounds that it is not concerned with the transformation of society." Above all, however, it is not this supposedly judgemental attitude or this desire to change society that is at stake here, but rather the threat to "normal" applied linguistics, and the ways in which critical applied linguistics is "dismissive totally of the attempt since the 1950s to develop a coherent applied linguistics" (Davies 1999: 141).

Although this applied linguistic gatekeeping might be interpreted as centrally concerned with the political advocacy entrenched in critical applied linguistics, it is really the disciplinary boundaries that are at stake here. The opposition to critical work that has been a feature of such handbooks and

introductions has been based more on a concern that some approaches to critical applied linguistics undermine applied linguistics as a discipline than because of its political focus, that a transgressive approach to applied linguistics (Pennycook 2006) is as much a challenge to its epistemological security as to its political neutrality. But how well do the claims to disciplinarity that is being so assiduously guarded stack up? There are several reasons to suggest that despite the desperate handbooking of applied linguistics, its disciplinary status is weak. As another who tried his hand at writing an introduction to the field observed, applied linguistics has a "lack of unitary theory and of clear disciplinary boundaries" (McCarthy 2001: 21). This, he suggested, might be seen as a form of disciplinary strength, with "its very openness to outside influences being its strongest and most enduring quality."

There are other reasons – more political than epistemological – to reject disciplinary claims. The hierarchical organization of knowledge in disciplines through processes of classification and framing plays a significant role in the regulation of access to knowledge (Bernstein 2000). As May (2014: 15) suggests, this helps us to see how and why disciplines "are so often defined (and confined) by a narrowly derived set of research assumptions, approaches, and related models of teaching and learning." Within a broader North/South politics of knowledge (Pennycook and Makoni 2020), these disciplining effects have an even greater negative impact. Applied linguistics has been narrowly constructed around particular Western or Northern frames of knowledge and language. Indeed, the attempt to ascertain the origins of applied linguistics as a discipline frequently falls into the Anglocentric trap of assuming its first use must have been in English, and to have emerged somewhere in the USA just after WWII (McCarthy 2001). As Oda and Takada (2005) make clear, however, the term 応用言語学 (Ouyou gengo gaku: applied linguistics) was in use in the 1930s in Japan, and we could doubtless trace alternative lineages through other languages and traditions.

Levon's (2017: 280) review of Coupland's (2016) edited book on sociolinguistic debates points to "the geopolitical positioning of the various contributions" being almost exclusively in the North: The effects of the overwhelming majority of contributors being located in the global North (and primarily in North America and Western Europe), he suggests, are twofold: on the one hand, "it makes it seem as if sociolinguistics does not take place outside of North America and Western Europe, whereas this is clearly not the case." It is unfortunate and limiting that sociolinguists from elsewhere – Africa, South America, or South and East Asia – are not included. On the other hand, this absence perpetuates "a particular geopolitics of knowledge that privileges Northern perspectives and prevents Southern scholars from contributing a differently positioned interpretation of events and practices that concern them . . . " (Levon 2017: 280–281). This

critique thus points to two kinds of omission: First, scholars from outside Europe and North America are not included, which means generally that these contexts of research are also not included; and second, alternative epistemologies that might derive from these southern contexts (southern epistemologies) are not as a result given any space (Pennycook and Makoni 2020).

There remains in socio- and applied linguistics a deplorable blindness towards contexts and ideas outside the Global North. Under claims of commonality – humanity, language, disciplinarity – classed, raced and locality-based understandings of language use are assumed to be applicable to the majority world. An inequitable knowledge hierarchy ensures that certain assumptions about language, diversity and education are given precedence over other possibilities elsewhere. When the northern gaze does fall on its southern neighbours, such assumptions continue in ways of thinking about multilingualism, mother tongue education, language preservation, research and so on. As Ndhlovu (2018: 118) explains, "although the high-sounding metaphors of human rights, anti-imperialism and biodiversity resonate with contemporary international conversations around social justice and equity issues, passionate appeals to them have not done much good because the standard language ideology remains ensconced as the only valid and legitimate conceptual framework that informs mainstream understandings of what is meant by 'language'."

It is often assumed that southern multilingualism must be concerned with language endangerment or diversity. This is more about the northern rush to worry about saving languages for the good of humanity or to marvel at the complexity of language resources in southern contexts than an engagement with southern matters of concern (Mufwene 2016). To assume that the South is diverse or that languages are endangered is to continue to gaze from northern perspectives. This is not to say that many southern contexts are not places of great diversity, nor that many languages may cease to be used. Rather, it is to challenge the assumptions both that such concerns are essentially what matter in the South and that the notions of diversity or endangerment make sense in such contexts. We need to raise more important questions than mother tongue education or language endangerment, not so much because they don't matter, but rather because they are ill-framed. As long as "colonial definitions, categories, and methods are imposed onto Indigenous language work" (Leonard 2017: 32), language projects will continue to be unsuccessful – in terms of not providing either expected linguistic or broader social, cultural and economic outcomes – and to be viewed with suspicion by local communities. In order to develop more successful language reclamation projects, Leonard (2017: 32) argues, we need to decolonise language.

For de Souza (2017: 206), the problem is that "the posture of some mainstream social scientists who claim to be pro-indigenous, and in favour of the preservation of indigenous languages and epistemologies" remains all too

often "trapped within the bounds of their own Enlightenment epistemologies." When these researchers "claim to listen to the indigenous other, they apparently only hear their own voices and values" unable to escape from the "bounds of lazy thinking, and thus liable to waste the wealth of experience of the ecology of knowledges that surrounds them but remains invisible to their eyes." De Souza (2017) is here taking up Santos' (2012) notion of "lazy reason" ('razão indolente') – the critique that dominant modes of thinking cannot understand or engage with alternative modes of thought. This "lingering inheritance of coloniality and its unequal distribution of knowledges, bodies, and languages" persists and may be something that applied linguistics, in its focus on education, needs to be aware of in order to "avoid, albeit unwittingly, continuing the legacy of coloniality" (de Souza 2017: 206).

Orthodox applied linguistics has long been content to accept definitions of language provided by linguistics and to focus instead on the application of such models. It has been common to assume that one is dealing with "determinate rule-based systems called 'languages'" (Harris 1990: 49), rather than asking the more useful question as to how our language ideologies are derived. The challenge, as de Korne and Leonard (2017: 7) remark, is how to avoid these "narrow perspectives on language use and knowledge that are potentially harmful to speech communities" and how to support the "promotion of minoritised languages by ground-level participants [as] fundamentally a political act through which participants negotiate control over linguistic authority, knowledge production, and self-definition through their linguistic practices." Albury's (2016: 306) studies of folk linguistic attitudes toward te reo Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand points to the problem of "universal language revitalisation theories that draw on Western European perspectives on language but assume universal relevance" and shows instead how many assumptions about standardisation, literacy and corpus planning are questioned from Māori perspectives. From this point of view, "folk linguistic research methods can contribute to the decolonization of sociolinguistic theory and method by understanding, voicing, legitimising, and ultimately applying more ontologies and epistemologies of language than those that generally premise current scholarship" (Albury 2017: 37).

In order to redress these deep-seated concerns about the coloniality of linguistics, we need not merely to encourage a more inclusive applied sociolinguistics that opens the doors to southern voices and encourages more research in southern contexts; we need to open up to a much wider range of ways of thinking. The challenge, therefore, is about more than an agenda of southern inclusion but rather about expanding epistemological repertoires (Di Carlo 2018), of opening up to the obligation to understand that inquiries into applied linguistic concerns elsewhere in the world must also be inquiries into other

ways of thinking that offer possibilities of disciplinary renewal. This is why the emphasis on decolonizing linguistics has been so important: It is about challenging the ways in which language studies have been tied to broader colonialities, while seeking both different epistemologies and ontologies of language (Pennycook 2020b). Interdisciplinarity will not be enough for such a project since disciplines are both problematic in themselves and limited in their capacity to open up new ways (or waves; Ingersoll 2016) of knowing: We need to think instead of how language studies can be more widely informed.

5 Towards epistemic assemblages

The notion of interdisciplinarity on the one hand problematically keeps the notions of disciplines in place, while on the other hand it misses the point that it would be better to talk in terms of epistemes rather than disciplines. When we draw on other domains of work (geography, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, cultural studies and so on), we do so most often because these fields have also been subject to related epistemological shifts (social, discursive, somatic, sensorial, spatial, practice and other so-called "turns"). When we borrow from other fields or disciplines, therefore, it is often precisely because those fields are drawing on related schools of thought. Interest in space, practice or ecology, for example, is not a result of a newfound concern with geography, sociology or biology, but rather with the epistemic effects of these areas putting ideas into play across the humanities and social sciences.

By talking in terms of epistemes, I am drawing in part on Foucault's (1966) notion of the episteme as a system of thought that provides the conditions of possibility for discourse, thought and action in different epochs (Pennycook 2018b). To develop recent work in posthumanist applied linguistics (Pennycook 2018a), for example, I drew on geography, philosophy, religion, cognitive science, biology, sociology, political science and so on, but largely to the extent that writers in these fields were taking up questions related to posthumanism (new materialism, speculative realism, distributed cognition, sensory landscapes, spatial activism and so on). From proclamations about the death of "Man" to investigations into enhanced forms of being, from the advent of the Anthropocene to new materialist ways of thinking about distributed cognition, the posthumanist episteme raises significant questions for applied linguistics in terms of rethinking the relation between humans and all that is deemed non-human (objects, contexts, the environment, animals and so on).

The engagement with these various areas of study implies not so much a commitment to or even a borrowing from other disciplines as an exploration of an emerging posthumanist episteme. When I took up Bogost's question "What's it like to be a thing?" (2012: 10; Pennycook 2018a), for example, or Godfrey-Smith's (2017: 77) related question "What does it feel like to be an octopus?" I wasn't engaged in transdisciplinary work with digital media (Bogost's background) or the history and philosophy of science (Godfrey-Smith's background) but with questions of object-oriented ontologies (Bogost's interest) or the evolution of intelligent life (Godfrey-Smith's interest) as part of an exploration of the posthumanist episteme. The similarity of their questions is not coincidental: They are both posing challenges to anthropocentric claims about being and consciousness. So to draw on spatial, sensorial, affective, posthumanist or other ways of thinking is not so much an inter- or trans-disciplinary issue as it is an epistemic question.

There are several lessons to be learned from the reimagining of language within socio- and applied linguistics discussed earlier. The translinguistic focus on repertoires of semiotic resources suggests a way of thinking about applied linguistic theory in terms of epistemological resources that we draw on in order to engage in certain language-related concerns. Interdisciplinarity is not the solution to overcoming disciplinary straightjacketing, not only because it has clearly been co-opted by various academic regimes (funding bodies and other institutions now require us to make inter- or transdisciplinary genuflections), or because the idea has rarely offered more than a superficial sense of plurality, but also because engagement across domains is more often an engagement across epistemes, and because the real questions applied linguistics needs to face are those of its applicability and responsibility to a wider set of contexts and ideas than has been the case up to now. Rather than thinking of applied linguistics as an inter- or transdisciplinary endeavour, therefore, it is more useful to think of it in terms of an epistemic assemblage.

6 Conclusion: Refreshing epistemological repertoires

By analogy with the perspective on semiotic assemblages, we might start to think of applied linguistics less in disciplinary or inter- or transdisciplinary terms, and more as temporary assemblages of thought and action that come together at particular moments when language-related concerns need to be addressed. This flexible account of applied linguistic practice takes us not only beyond concerns about its disciplinary status but also beyond the idea of an inter/transdisciplinary applied

linguistics. It also helps us see how applied linguistic practices, which may appear diverse, confused or undisciplined, are instead the conjoining of different language-oriented projects, epistemes and matters of concern (Latour 2004). Such an understanding makes it possible to see how work that apparently draws on other disciplines is really engaged in emerging epistemes that cut across areas of the social sciences and humanities. It opens up applied linguistics to an ethical engagement with alternative ways of thinking about language and context from the Global South, so that renewal of applied linguistics comes not via other disciplines but rather through alternative forms of knowledge.

Disciplines are held in place by a range of factors, external and internal. The former – conferences, handbooks, departments and so on – seek to frame the area and its work. Disciplines, like standard languages, have always been exclusionary: on the upside, they help consolidate ideas, enhance collaboration, bring solidity to a field; on the downside, they narrow the area of interest, its ideas and methods, and they exclude so much that does not fit. Disciplines are hegemonic knowledge structures. While challenges to applied linguistics as a discipline may bring a downside of insecurity, instability and incoherence, they also bring many benefits of flexibility, innovation and breadth. Like language standardization, while there may be gains to be made by such processes or normalization, this history of consolidation and exclusion has also rendered applied linguistics unhelpfully narrow in its epistemologies, politics and methods. There are a number of reasons to reject claims to disciplinary status for applied linguistics, including a more persuasive argument that a field of applied study is ordered not so much by a core disciplinary focus but rather by the questions it asks and the fields it engages with – language policy, language in the professions, language in education and so on – and that the understandings of language, the matters of concern, and the research tools to engage with them change accordingly.

Internal disciplinary factors are more concerned with the object of knowledge at its heart. Questioning the notions of language and languages within applied linguistics has several effects. It opens up applied linguistics to a wider set of possibilities about what matters: As Toohey (2019: 953) suggests, ideas born of new forms of materialism, such as assemblages or entanglements (Pennycook 2020a), have major implications for applied linguistic pedagogy and research, encouraging us "to ask new questions, and be alert to innovate, experiment, and learn new ways of teaching, researching, and being." With changes to the ways linguistics and socio- and applied linguistics fit together – linguistics is losing its status as the intellectual centre to which social and applied effects are added – these shifts in the ways we think about semiotic and epistemic assemblages open up possibilities of starting the long overdue process of reassembling linguistics beyond its structuralist dreams of identifiable languages separated from each other and an

identifiable conception of language separable from its surrounds. Applied linguistics as a constellation of shifting interests around language in the world provides some hope of renewal for linguistics as the study of language matters.

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