

Precarious assemblages: Translingual entanglements

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The popular uptake of notions of translingualism has softened its ideological force as a means “to decolonize our conception of language and, especially, language education” (García, 2019, p.162), and reduced its potential as praxis to playful language mixing or the use of first languages in second language classrooms. Translingual projects have nevertheless long had a focus on forms of precarity, on the language use of non-elite multilingual speakers, on “the rights of racialized people to be educated on their own terms and on the basis of their own language practices.” (García et al., 2021, p. 4). This focus on everyday language practices involves a critical analysis of lived and embodied experiences of social difference. Such work aims to understand ‘language from below,’ to show that linguistic boundaries are “the result of ideological invention and sedimentation” that “do not guide communication in everyday contexts” and that such communication is “not limited to ‘language’ insofar as interlocutors draw on a range of semiotic and spatial repertoires” (Lee and Dovchin, 2020, p1).

In order to explore translinguistic precarity in greater depth, we need to do three things: First, move towards a sufficiently complex understanding of what precarity means (and does not mean). Is it a general condition of our times, a longstanding effect of capitalist exploitation or an emergent property of unequal social relations? Second, we need to think through ways of relating precarity to language. It is not enough to predefine precarious lives in terms of marginalisation, poverty, struggle, or discrimination and then to assume that the language

used by or towards such speakers is necessarily precarious or produces precarity? We need instead to understand the co-articulation of translingual practices and lived experiences of precarity, asking how one informs the other. So third, it is important to understand the dynamic interactions among material relations, language ideologies and linguistic resources, where precarity may be an emergent feature as much as a pre-condition, of a local assemblage.

On precarity

A case can be made that precarious labour is now the norm: “At the same time that labor insecurity ... has become the rule, the structures and institutions of public support are being destroyed. Precarity has become something like a generalized existential condition.” (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p. 59). The labour conditions commonly found around the world can thus be described in terms of precarity, or what Standing (2014) describes as the precariat: a precariously employed and mobile proletariat that lacks security in relation to the labour market, training, income and representation. Whether such conditions are as new as sometimes claimed, or particular to the rise of neoliberalism, or whether they have always been an aspect of capitalist exploitation remains an open question (Kasimir, 2018). The current emphasis on precarity may mistakenly assume novelty for what is in fact a long-term feature of capitalism.

Precarity had been a common focus in sociology long before Standing (2014) made his claims for the precariat as a social class in itself. Bourdieu drew attention to the precarity of migrant workers (Bourdieu, 1963, p. 358) with “Point d’horaire régulier ni lieu de travail fixe” (No regular schedule or fixed place of work): “L’emploi du temps quotidien partagé

entre la recherche du travail et les travaux de fortune, la semaine ou le mois découpés au hasard de l'embauche en jours ouvrables et jours chômés, tout porte la marque de la précarité. ” (The daily schedule divided between looking for work and makeshift work, the week or month split up at random into working days and non-working days, everything bears the mark of precariousness) (1963, p. 353). Looking for work - “La recherche du travail” – he goes on, is the only constant in this “existence ballottée au gré du hasard” (haphazard existence at the mercy of chance) (Bourdieu, 1963, p. 353).

Although the idea of the precariat gives us a way of understanding the difficulties and insecurities of undertaking work under conditions of mobility and transience, as well as the erosion of (or impossibility of access to) public welfare systems, it has come in for criticism: it is unclear that such diverse work contexts constitute a class, and as Munck (2013) points out from a Global South perspective, the idea overlooks ways that work has always been precarious for much of the majority world (having a ‘decent job’ is not something that all can aspire to): Shadow and informal economies – often viewed as criminal or illicit – are the norm across many parts of the world. Precarious work conditions have “long been experienced by subordinated populations in the dominant countries and almost all populations in the subordinated countries” (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p. 59).

It is also important to understand precarity beyond the concerns of the labour market. Life in contemporary society, Hardt and Negri (2017, pp. 103-4) assert, “is becoming precarious not only in terms of work contracts, but in all phases of life. Some communities, including migrants, people of color, LGBTQ people, the disabled, and others, recognize this precarity first and suffer it most acutely, but their experiences are harbingers for others. A society of precarity is a form of misery.” Butler (2004; 2009) draws a distinction between

precariousness as a generalised human condition stemming from interdependence and the precarity experienced by marginalised, poor, and disenfranchised people exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. Butler (2004: xii) thus draws our attention to the socio-ontological dimension of precarity, the ways vulnerability is distributed, and the “differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others”.

Butler (2009) looks at precarity as a result of gender nonconforming people not being recognized as subjects in the eyes of the laws of the nation-states. This makes them legally and politically precarious (Butler, 2009, p. ii). Precarity is not only about material conditions simply conceived; it also concerns norms and ways of living. “Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics.” Precarity is therefore closely linked with gender norms, for “those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence.” Such gender norms affect “who will be criminalized on the basis of public appearance; who will fail to be protected by the law or, more specifically, the police, on the street, or on the job, or in the home.” (2009, p. ii)

Tsing (2015, p. 20) raises the possibility that precarity may be “the condition of our time.” “We hear about precarity in the news every day. People lose their jobs or get angry because they never had them. Gorillas and river porpoises hover at the edge of extinction. Rising seas swamp whole Pacific islands” As she argues, however, it is common to view such precarity as “an exception to how the world works. It’s what “drops out” from the system.” But what if “precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systematicity

we seek?” (Tsing, 2015, p. 20). While this view, on the one hand, might appear to blunt the edge of a focus on precarity (precarity is all around us), it raises a different question about the position from which this is viewed, the organizational normativity we assume.

We therefore take the following position on precarity: While it is tempting to assume that precarity is a given of contemporary life, that a pervasive precarity haunts a generation as the result of neoliberal work practices, or that precarity can be readily mapped onto those whose work (or lack thereof) renders their lives difficult, an understanding of precarity needs to consider both other layers of disparity – including gender normativity, racial discrimination, and lack of access for the disabled – as well as the lived experience of precarity that makes life on the edge a constant struggle to sustain oneself (Masquelier, 2019). As Hovens (2021b, p. 662) explains “inequality and exploitation are not necessarily given ‘facts’ that can be objectively detected or measured by a researcher, but subjective experiences based on various acts of linguistic and semiotic landscaping.” How these experiences of precarity may be linked to such language practices will be discussed in the following sections.

Precarious play

The notion of precarity, we have argued, needs to be treated with caution lest we apply to those in apparent precarious circumstances our own lens of how ‘normal’ lives should be lived, assuming we know too easily what it is for particular participants (precarity along lines of work, ethnicity, gender, or geopolitical location). Precarity has to be understood in relational terms, not just in terms of economic disparities, but in relation to family and friendship support structures, contingencies of the local economy, gender norms, cultural and religious practices, and, of particular importance for this chapter, local language policies and possibilities. Take, for example, the relation between the COVID-19 pandemic and

multilingualism in a city such as Sydney. On the face of it, they are two quite separate domains: speaking several languages should not make one vulnerable to a virus.

Living in multilingual communities, however, did become a risk factor because of the multiple levels of intersectional disparity that bring together frontline work (nurses, security guards, construction workers, bus drivers, cleaners), the need to work multiple shifts (underpaid work), urban organization (closer living conditions), use of public transport (the need to move for work, in contrast to those able to work at home), lack of green space (poor infrastructure), family size (large, intergenerational families living together), and limited access to digital resources or health and educational services (linguistic, cultural and digital accessibility). Multilingualism in its relation to class, race and community, and in contrast to middle class communities able to work in isolation in other suburbs, became part of an assemblage of precarity.

Translingual practices are often similarly connected to precarity in the workplace. Short term contract labour – whether Bulgarians working as cleaners in the leisure industry in North Finland (Strömmer, 2021), or Filipino workers in water manufacture in Saipan (Northern Mariana Islands) (Hess, 2021) – will, almost of necessity, put people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds together. In busy workplaces, this inevitably means working out ways of communicating with whatever means are available. As Hovens (2021a) observes, the policies in a steel foundry in the Netherlands favouring short-term contract labour shift the languages of the workplace to a wider mixture that includes, on a semi-formal level (notices for workers) Dutch, German and English, and at an informal level a wider variety of languages such as Polish, Turkish and Arabic.

The older workers – the “oude garde” (old guard) – themselves often fairly content to operate with a mixture of Dutch, Limburgish (the local variety of Dutch) and some German (a considerable number of workers cross the border from Germany to work), tend to resent these changes. In such contexts, the growing multilingualism of the workplace (because of increased casualisation and migration) may be perceived by the older workers as a threat to their security. For them, they undermine older workplace practices and solidarities. It is worth reminding ourselves that although such blue-collar work may be physically demanding, dirty and dangerous, it was not necessarily precarious: unionisation, work communities and continuity were common in such contexts. For some workers from that era, there may be a nostalgia for a time before mobility and casualisation (Pietikäinen & Allan, 2021).

These workers may also play with these new language resources. Hovens (2021a) notes the use of “jalla, jalla”, which some people in the casting department (one part of the metal foundry) jokingly used to tell each other to work faster. As we have observed elsewhere (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2016), the ‘double-edged’ nature of language play in workplaces is often, at least to an observer, equally discriminatory. A description of the workforce in a large market by one of the long-term workers of Lebanese background, for example, appears both jocular and disparaging: “We’ve got them all. Deaf, dumb, blind, stupid... Different races... You’ll find everything here. It’s probably the most perfect place to be in the world. If you can work in this place you can work anywhere in the world. You won’t find anywhere better than here.” (Muhibb). These comments are both affirmative – the diversity of people makes it “the most perfect place to be in the world” – and offensive “Deaf, dumb, blind, stupid.” The kinds of interaction Muhibb is referring to here may themselves seem somewhere between playful and derogatory: “I’ll fucken fix you up don’t worry! Wait’n see.

Yeah I'll fix you up, ya Lebs!" If we recognize such interactions as translingual playfulness, they also suggest an interactive precarity. Among male workers (this market is an almost entirely male work environment) of different ethnic backgrounds, this can nonetheless be seen as a form of phatic communion (Blommaert and Varis, 2015).

Muhibb himself also used the term 'yallah, yallah', in his case an example of an Arabic speaker urging a mixture of Arabic and non-Arabic speakers to hurry up with their work: "Yallah yallah shiitake, shiitake. Let's go, come on." (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015). This is a more obviously translingual utterance (Arabic, Japanese mushrooms, and English) but also one that points to workplace hierarchies. He and his brothers run their market business together and employ a range of workers of different backgrounds, generally on short-term contracts. This 'yallah, yallah' is one that points to the precarity of their work force: Get a move on if you want to keep your job. Philip, the foreman of one of the construction sites that was also part of our larger research project (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015), similarly claimed to know the term: "I know how to, um, I know how to say 'hurry up' in Arabic: 'yallah yallah'. And 'ppalli ppalli' is Korean for hurry up, " (ACE / Peter 31/10/12).

Theodoropoulou (2020, p.378) similarly records the use of this term by an engineer of Greek origin on a construction site in Qatar addressing a group of labourers: "Malakes [Greek, 'mates'], in 15 minutes break; gather here and leave *sāvadhānam sāvadhānam* (Malayalam: 'slowly, slowly'); One hour for *inemuri* [Japanese; 'nap'] and then you come back. *Yalla* [Arabic: hurry up], go now!". Theodoropoulou (2020, p.381) explains the term is commonly used by Arabic speakers in Qatar (though none appear to be involved in this interaction) but also that the "phonetic proximity with the Greek equivalent word "ela," which also means "come (on)," potentially contributes to this use. Again, we can see the conjunction of

translingual practices and playfulness – a rather haphazard cosmopolitan performance that nevertheless does some accommodating work, at least for the Malayalam-speaking workers from Kerala – and workplace hierarchies.

Given its use in the Dutch metal foundry, as well as in the context of Qatar, where no Arabic speakers seemed to be involved in this interaction, the phrase ‘yallah yallah’ appears to have become a widely-used term that may not depend on the languages of either speaker or hearer, but on the wider mobility of workers and language. It is used in different contexts for urging workers to work faster. It points to the mobility and possible precarity of workers and language: Work faster if you want to keep your job. In all of these contexts it can also be seen as both translingual (inevitably, given these workplaces, it occurs in contexts of mixed language use) and sometimes playful. As the editors of this volume have stressed, however, the emphasis on translingual playfulness has often overlooked far more serious concerns around such language use. Playfulness itself may be serious business – as either discriminatory or resistant practice - in relation to precarious forms of existence as people, ethnicities, religions, language, and migratory history collide. As these examples have suggested, to the extent that ‘yallah yallah’ may at times be playful, it is also part of translingual environment of precarious work conditions, workplace hierarchies and relations that exacerbate such precarity.

Language precarity and language ideological assemblages

There are other ways in which we can see relations between forms of precarity and language practices. One is in terms of the values given to different languages. While some workplaces may maintain monolingual or specific multilingual language policies – Otomo (2021) gives the example of a Japanese-only policy in an aged-care residence – such policies will rarely

constrain the translingual practices that are often the norm (English and other languages from the Philippines or Indonesia in such health-care environments, for example). Different work ideologies also have implications for language practices. For cleaners in northern Finland the linguistic expectations depend in part on how the work is seen: language requirements may be flexible for skilled physical work, but when the work is construed as customer service, there is a greater emphasis on multilingual skills (English often comes into play here) and when teamwork is seen as important, a shared work language may be seen as essential (Strömmer, 2021). What mixes of language may be used in different workplaces, and whether they should be seen as precarious, depend therefore on various factors, from the nature of the workplace, workplace ideologies, hiring practices, language policies, and language practices.

At a different market from the one discussed above, located in Chinatown, Sydney, when asked which languages are commonly spoken in the market, a young man who is husking corn in the back corner with two other workers, answers, “乜language都有㗎!” (all kinds of languages are spoken here!), and “乜都有,撈埋一齊 (all sorts of languages mixed together)”. The young corn-husker himself reports a broad linguistic repertoire: Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Mandarin, Indonesian, and English. To explore the relations between poorly-paid precarious work (such workers are generally part of the informal economy, paid intermittently for their labour) and multilingual repertoires, we need to look beyond frameworks such as language commodification. While language commodification purports to provide a political economy of language, it fails to adequately account for processes by which language can be understood as a commodity, or to distinguish between commodification as discourse and as a product of labour (Petrovic & Yazan, 2021; Simpson & O’Regan, 2021).

A more fruitful way forward is to look at such language repertoires in relation to *language ideological assemblages* (Kroskrity, 2018, 2021). This brings to the fore the “complexity of people using and thinking about their languages in social worlds” which is “profoundly shaped by political economic disparities” but also “by those speakers’ own desires to belong – to nations, clans, tribes, global movements – and to use their linguistic resources to create and/or authenticate relevant, and often intersectional identities”. Such assemblages from this perspective embrace “social, persona, cultural artifacts, political-economic systems” (Kroskrity 2021, p. 130). There is more at stake in this entanglement of language and employment than notions such as linguistic capital or language commodification suggest.

A framework of *language ideological assemblages* enables a clearer focus on the assemblage of geopolitical, historical and economic factors, local economic determinants, and particular language varieties at play. These distributed and assembled parts contribute to linguistic identification and exclusion and are crucial to the construction of class or precarious positions. The corn-husker’s diverse linguistic resources are connected to the geopolitics of Australia as well as the Chinese migration history to and from Indonesia and Australia. His repertoire of linguistic resources is very evidently part of these intertwined migratory histories. It is also very useful in this market, where as he suggests, many different languages are in constant use. Clearly, however, while his multilingual resources assist in gaining and keeping casual work in this environment, other factors render these multilingual resources more limited as a means to move beyond precarious employment.

A comparison with two workers who supply the vegetables to such markets may be useful here. In the outskirts of Sydney, squeezed between the airport, container terminals and housing estates, the old wooden workers’ cottages stand with brick chimneys rising above

rusting corrugated iron roofs, and broken fly screens on the doors. The blackened rice pots and woks in the dark kitchens, the conical straw hats of the elderly workers pushing wheelbarrows and digging the rows of vegetables by hand, suggest a range of precarious factors. The couple who are now in their 60s moved from Baitu (白土镇) in Guangdong to Australia in the early 1990s. Before starting their own vegetable gardens, the wife worked as a nanny for a Chinese family, as a dishwasher in a Chinese restaurant, and the husband worked for various market gardeners. The couple speaks a regional variety of Cantonese and little English, but the patches she wears to ease her arthritis and her husband's crooked back tell us of the hard life they have led. Here in the vegetable field where they grow *bok choy* (Chinese cabbage) and *choy sum* (Chinese flowering cabbage), as well as other vegetables and herbs (dill and parsley and mints), we see (and are told of) a life of struggle where hard labour, age, health, language, migration policies and the price of vegetables intersect.

This couple have a degree of independence that the corn-husker does not, though their work is long and arduous and brings limited rewards. Their linguistic repertoire is more limited (or at least less widely dispersed across language varieties), and their lack of English can limit their ability to negotiate vegetable process with local wholesalers (we observed a limited interaction between the woman and a man of Bangladeshi background buying their bitter melons). The corn-husker has a wider variety of resources, though these have to be understood in relation to their vernacular style: he may name languages that might be deemed high-status varieties (English and Mandarin), but these are largely vernacular alignments with other workers. If for educational, migratory and other reasons, corn-husking is the best available work, these multilingual resources may afford certain social advantages and bring possibilities of flexibility and mobility, but as part of a language ideological assemblage that

includes labour, migration, education and vernacular style, these multilingual resources are as much part of this precarious labour assemblage as they are any form of escape from it.

Precarious translingual assemblages

We have been moving towards an understanding of assemblages in this paper that now needs some further explanation. We have written extensively about assemblages and entanglements elsewhere (Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2017, 2019); here we want to draw attention to three particular elements of an assemblage-focused approach to translingual precarity: a clearer understanding of assemblages themselves; a perspective on the relationship between assemblages and prior social analyses; and a view on translingual practices that can be integrated into this assemblage orientation. First, to look at social relations in terms of assemblages is to bring in a wider range of possible actants than is often the case in sociolinguistic work. When we try to understand the precarious positioning of various people, we also need to take into account the relations among the language practices, linguistic capital, speakers, type of labour, location and the field of interaction. Thinking in terms of assemblages enables us to see “through relations of history and potential,” a conceptual focus that “disrupts how we conceive agency and therefore critique,” and a “critical imaginary...with specific political implications” (McFarlane, 2011, p. 208).

Tsing’s (2015, p.4) study of “precarious livelihoods and precarious environments” through an analysis of *matsutake* mushroom commerce and ecology provides one of the most fruitful analyses along these lines. When the 1986 Chernobyl disaster contaminated European supplies of *matsutake* and prices in Japan soared, jobless Indochinese refugees in California rushed to the Pacific Northwest forests in search of the new “white gold.” For Tsing (2015, p. 24), assemblages “drag political economy inside them, and not just for humans;” they are

“sites for watching how political economy works” not through a predefined operation of capital, but by the juxtaposition of people, things, and life trajectories. From this point of view, precarity or precarious conditions are understood as ‘happenings’ that emerge at the juncture where history, economy, people, ecology, political economy and geography meet. Hmong and Mien people who forage *matsutake* are precariously positioned in society not merely because of their refugee status but also because of their position within the larger assemblage of the commodity chain and global economy (i.e., salvage accumulations) as well as local government policy on forestry.

For Bennett (2010, p. 34) “an assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it”. The question for Tsing (2015, p. 23) is how “gatherings sometimes become ‘happenings,’ that is, greater than the sum of their parts?” While the configuration of the assemblage is partly attributable to the elements that compose it, it is also important to avoid assigning capacity and agency to one particular predefined element. This is not to suggest that precariousness is accidental or random, or to reject the operation of capital or discrimination. We need to consider circulation, production and distribution of capital and the economy as a whole. A precarious assemblage is neither predefined nor is it the sum of the configuration of its elements, but rather a happening with agentic capacity: “the configuration of the assemblage will depend on the particular capacities and agencies of the bodies out of which it is composed. Morphologically, typologically or taxonomically similar components will have a different agentic impact in different assemblage configurations” (Hamilakis & Jones 2017, p. 79). It might be tempting to suggest that all assemblages are precarious by dint of their temporary, ad hoc, coming-togetherness, but this would be to confuse the transitory quality of the assemblage with its potential effects.

Second, since the idea of an assemblage orients towards a temporary coming together of a range of elements, there is a move away from prior social determinants of language use. This is to avoid the pitfall of assuming that language use simply reflects social conditions, and to focus instead on the performative nature of language by viewing language as social action rather than a reflection of society or social change (Cameron, 1997). Language, Butler (1997) argues, should not be seen as “a static and closed system whose utterances are functionally secured in advance by the ‘social positions’ to which they are mimetically related” (p.145). Thus, “by claiming that performative utterances are only effective when they are spoken by those who are (already) in a position of social power to exercise words as deeds,” writers such as Bourdieu, who start their analysis from a sociological perspective, may inadvertently foreclose “the possibility of an agency that emerges from the margins of power” (p.156).

Butler’s positions on performativity and precarity suggest the need to understand precarity from a point of view that does not make socioeconomic or other predefined social categories primary and instead looks at questions, for example, of sexual identity, and asks how we see precarious language as performative rather than representative, how we view language not as a result of preceding power but part of the production of that power. There is a danger of assuming the a priori socioeconomic category of precarity (migrant, construction worker, ethnic minority and so on) to indicate that language in precarious conditions is precarious language. While it is evident that material and embodied attributes (e.g., ethnicity or gender) may trigger linguistic discrimination and injustice (Dovchin, 2019, Dovchin & Dryden, 2021), we also need careful analysis of the linguistic realisation of precarity.

Third, while much of the focus on translingual elements so far in this paper has been on the congruence of language resources at a particular moment, an assemblage orientation points more towards a broadening of semiotic elements than a multiplicity of languages, or rather to both in conjunction. We have already discussed above limitations with an assumption that translingual practices imply playfulness: messing around at work may have discriminatory implications. When the focus is on the creative use of linguistic and nonlinguistic resources, furthermore, there is no reason to assume that this may be playful. Linguistic creativity, Storch reminds us, “doesn’t have to be playful and amusing; it can also be about experiences of marginalization, injustice and pain. There are consequently different creativities and different indexicalities of creatively manipulated speech” (Storch, 2018, p. 48). As Dovchin (2019) shows, Mongolian women may employ various linguistic, paralinguistic and semiotic strategies (“e.g. Anglicized Mongolian, English mockeries, parodies, emotions, strong expressions, voices, griefs, complaints, codes and accents” (p.15)), to tackle intolerance and discrimination for not speaking the dominant variety of English in Australia in both institutional and non-institutional settings.

Neither should we assume that translingual practices are themselves either transgressive or transformative. As Jaspers (2018) reminds us, institutional assumptions about languages and broader social forces of inequality may render translingual approaches to education ineffective. It has also been suggested that “conceptualization of language as fluid may increase social inequalities in certain sociolinguistic situations, especially those of mobility and precarity” (Stanford-Billinghurst, 2021, p. 66; cf Heugh and Stroud, 2018). While some of these arguments confuse the level of analysis and application – there is a difference between sociolinguistic analysis and applied linguistic advocacy of language use – and misrepresent the translingual position on languages – “We have affirmed unequivocally that

languages do exist, and that they are socially constructed realities” (García et al., 2021, p. 5) – these concerns point to the ways that common definitions of languages and how they should be used may be the means by which people’s lives are governed and stigmatised (Dovchin 2019, Dovchin & Dryden 2021).

The position we take is that first order language practices and second order language definitions (Thibault, 2011) play very different roles within language ideological assemblages (Kroskrity, 2021, p.131) which allow for “a more dynamic view of languages as continuously being reconstructed by their speakers.” These in turn are part of larger assemblages of people, places and things. The key question is what constitutes a precarious assemblage (if it is not predefined sociologically)? When, and in combination with what, does language become part of an assemblage that is made precarious by its social connections? What constitutes precarity if the material or linguistic condition does not exclusively shape it? When do words become precarious, not just because of who utters them, but because of where they sit in the shifting assemblages of a workplace? This allows therefore for a dynamic relation among material relations, language ideologies and linguistic resources.

This perspective enables us to see how diverse but limited linguistic and non-linguistic repertoires, language ideological assemblages and precarity can be brought together. Many people pass through the Bangladeshi-run store in Tokyo where we have conducted a long-term linguistic ethnographic project (e.g. Pennycook and Otsuji, 2019), from West African academics to Swiss embassy officials, from Maghrebi couples buying chickpeas to Uzbek and Nepali workers on recent work visas looking for cheap chicken. One cold day in December, 2017, a trio of young men are strolling through the shop. They catch sight of an Uzbek 500 sōm banknote on the counter, beneath a vinyl sheet positioned under the till. The

oldest of the three men points at the Uzbek note and says to a Bangladeshi shop assistant behind the counter (in Japanese) ‘これ私達の (this is ours)’ which is met with ‘ウズベキスタンでしょ (Uzbekistan, right?)’ from the shop assistant.

The pointing gesture matters as a means of identification, overcoming their limited Japanese, English or other commonly used linguistic resources in this store (Bangla, Urdu, Hindi and Nepalese). The common use of gesture as well as forms of interaction and resemiotization using shopping lists and other artefacts in the store (Pennycook & Otsuji, in press) are significant parts of the translingual assemblages of the shop. For a new wave of migrant workers – there has been a sharp increase in Uzbek workers in Japan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2019) as part of a wider emphasis on non-skilled overseas workers – their linguistic resources have not yet found a place in such spaces. Their Uzbek utterances - ‘Bu qorachalar kim? Hintlar ekanu’ (Who are these darker people? Seem like Indians) – meanwhile not only go unnoticed, but suggest their discomfort in this shop and their lack of understanding of who runs it and for what clientele (the shop does not announce itself as a Bangladeshi-run store but instead promotes a diversity of products, spices and halal food).

For these three young men, precarious translingual assemblages form and reform around them in these moments. They involve limited local language skills, migration history (there is already a 500 sōm note on the counter), new labour regulations (to support, in part, an ageing Japanese population), confusion about what kind of shop they are in (they are puzzled by the Bangladeshi staff), the use of pointing as a minimal communication strategy (in lieu of other resources), and their desire to identify themselves to the shopkeeper (which he obligingly acknowledges). We can therefore see how various spatiotemporal elements come together to

create local meaning, how precarity and disparity occur through negotiation between various human and non-human elements, including languages, bank notes, work and geography.

Their precarity is relational: they may have arrived in Japan as migrant workers with limited work rights, but their pay and work conditions are better than in many other contexts; and their limited linguistic skills in this context are temporarily overcome by some knowledge of Japanese and the possibility of pointing to a banknote from home. This precarity can be seen as part of an assemblage that includes economic conditions and social relations (such as their temporary confusion working out where to shop in a strange city). Their language use is not only a result of their new work and living conditions but also produces social relations with the shop staff and other people around them. This translinguistic assemblage is by no means playful but rather is part of a struggle to locate and identify themselves by whatever means are available to them.

Conclusion: Translingual entanglements of precarity

We have sought in this chapter to develop an understanding of translanguaging and precarity in relational terms. Precarity is not just a question of employment or economic disparity nor only of marginalization or discrimination. It also concerns family and friendship support structures, contingencies of the local economy, gender norms, cultural and religious practices, and local language policies and possibilities. This suggests the need for caution in mapping precarious language onto precarious lives, or assuming that precarious language practices directly imply precarious lives. The challenge is to see how language may be part of a precarious assemblage, part of what makes an assemblage precarious, a coming together of

political economy, material relations, language practices and a range of other possible elements. This enables us to see how language is rarely either a reflection or a producer of precarity, but rather is involved in complex assemblages of disparity. These translingual relations themselves also need to be seen in terms of language ideological assemblages (Kroskrity, 2021), the ways in which social worlds, political economic disparities, a desire to belong, and the remaking of intersectional identities are intertwined with language and how we think about language.

We need to be cautious not to assume precarity a priori. There is a double danger here that a Northern view of others' lives (in less stable employment and with fewer conditions of support) and their language use (which may itself appear precarious relative to normative linguistic assumptions), assumes that an apparently precarious existence leads to precarious language use, or that apparently precarious language use reflects a precarious existence. If we accept Hardt and Negri's (2017, p. 59) contention that "precarity and the common are the key terms for recognizing the poverty and potential of the multitude in the age of neoliberalism," we are faced by the challenge as to how collective action towards the common can be achieved. A problem with various approaches to precarity is the assumption of a collective condition (either of labour or more generally) against which collective action can be taken (Standing, 2014; Butler, 2015). Yet the very notion of precarity, its relational constitution and isolating effects, make such a proposition unlikely (Masquelier, 2019).

An assemblage approach to translingual precarity, however, presents some useful ways out of this bleak outlook, since it suggests both analytic and political possibilities for seeing that forms of social and linguistic determinism can be rethought. Rather than forms of linguistic absolutism – language use outside the normative constraints of standard language ideologies

can only ever be marginal – or economic absolutism – labour marginalisation will always produce social and linguistic marginality – an assemblage approach to the question enables us to focus on the range of factors at play, from political economy to other forms of materialism, from language use to gesture, from collaborative social action to less co-operative practices. These come together in the making of precarity but also in their undoing, and provide possible modes of thought and action that can unwind the operations of translingual precarity.

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