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Critical realism and sociolinguistics

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of some of the ideas found in my recently published works which, together, call for a philosophy of both applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. Based on a critique of successionism and interpretivism – two prominent empiricist tendencies in applied linguistics/sociolinguistics – the paper highlights principles guiding critical realist sociolinguistics as a viable alternative. These principles include a layered, or stratified, view of social phenomena including language, language users, and language education, a robust approach to the formulation of causal claims, and commitment to objective knowledge. The final section offers an argument in support for a universalist approach to sociolinguistics and social critique aligned with critical realism.

Introduction

In this paper, I highlight principles guiding a critical realist approach to sociolinguistic research, and argue that critical realism offers much in terms of conceptual possibilities for a renewed sociolinguistics. To achieve this task, I quote, paraphrase and expand on excerpts from some of my recent publications, which are listed in the reference section. For a more complete exposition of the ideas contained in this paper, I invite readers to consult these works. In the final section, I also make an argument in support for a universalist approach to social critique. The main reason for this closing argument is that, in contemporary sociolinguistic research more specifically, and the current culture war in the media and on college campuses around the world more broadly, universalism appears to be drowned by a cacophony of conflicting and often radical voices from both the political right and the left regarding issues of identity, race, politics and social life. This argument for universalism is, in many ways, aligned with critical realism's layered viewpoint and its commitment to objective knowledge, and is, as I argue, a central component of any critical approach to social research including sociolinguistics.

Readers might notice that the argumentation hereby offered moves from one conceptual idea to the next in ways which might, for some at least, raise more questions than provide answers. I welcome this critique along with likely disagreements regarding the arguments developed in the following pages. The main purpose in this paper, I must stress, is not to present a fully developed philosophy of sociolinguistics, but rather to summarize my recent work as a way to document, at this point in my career, how I see the future of sociolinguistics unfold. In this sense, *Gakuen Ronshu* provides an appropriate context for this task. Applied linguists might also note that my approach to argumentation departs somewhat from standard discourse in applied linguistic scholarship, and this is largely because my interest centers mainly on the development of a philosophy of applied linguistics as a profoundly interdisciplinary branch of the social sciences. Although my research centers on sociolinguistic questions including the interaction between linguistic ideologies and language learning/teaching, language policy and planning and so forth, I also navigate rather freely in this paper between talks about applied linguistics and sociolinguistics for two reasons: (1) the latter is comfortably situated within the former, and (2) much of the argumentation which follows is equally relevant to both fields.

For the past decade, my academic and intellectual journey has been shaped in large part by the strengthening realization that sociolinguistics and social theory share a consequential relationship, and that both social theorists and sociolinguists still struggle to develop robust understandings of this crucial connection and, more importantly, successfully merge into their works the conceptual and methodological possibilities this relationship affords. While social theory is principally invested in elucidating the complex and ongoing structure-culture-agency interaction leading to the emergence of social phenomena and society in a general sense, sociolinguistics provides descriptive, explanatory and critical insight into language as a social phenomenon and as an emergent outcome of the structure-culture-agency interaction. Arguably because of its marked emphasis on both language and social factors, sociolinguistics has been perhaps the sub-field of applied linguistics most invested in understanding and expanding the dialog between linguists and social theorists. Although sociolinguists have already made notable contributions in this regard (e.g., Brumfit, 1997; Coupland, Sarangi and Candlin, 2001; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; Lass, 1980; Pennycook, 2021; Rampton, 2006; Sealey and Carter, 2004; Weideman, 2007, 2009, 2015), there remain clear and problematic traces of both empiricism and relativism in the field, suggesting the need for further conceptual refinement.

As my understanding of the relationship between sociolinguistics and social theory evolved through doctoral and post-doctoral research projects, I began to formulate more specific conceptual and empirically-grounded research questions regarding language and its users, and

became increasingly aware of the many different (and at times problematic) ways in which claims about language and its real-world uses have been formulated by sociolinguists and applied linguists alike. Viewed from a different angle, my growing interest in understanding the links between sociolinguistics and social theory has led me towards an interdisciplinary mode of thinking on the one hand, and the formulation of more targeted ontological questions pertaining to specific phenomena studied by sociolinguists on the other.

That being said, the presence of unresolved ontological issues within applied linguistic scholarship at large is not surprising. As I argue in Bouchard (2021), applied linguistics (which again includes sociolinguistics) is a rather recent branch of the social science which has yet to develop the sort of conceptual and empirical rigor and consistency seen in other social scientific fields such as economics, political science, anthropology and sociology. Although still understood rather simplistically as an area of research and practice concerned with real-world applications of linguistic research insight, applied linguistics, it must be noted, has evolved to become a truly complex, multi-layered, increasingly sociologically-informed, and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. Emphasizing the notion of research as a problem-solving endeavor, Davies and Elder (2004: 1) state that applied linguists are

> concerned with solving or at least ameliorating social problems involving language. The problems applied linguistics concerns itself with are likely to be: How can we teach languages better? How can we improve the training of translators and interpreters? How can we write a valid language examination? How can we evaluate a school bilingual program? How can we determine the literacy levels of a whole population? How can we helpfully discuss the language of a text? What advice can we offer a Ministry of Education on a proposal to introduce a new medium of instruction? How can we compare the acquisition of a European and an Asian language? What advice should we give a defense lawyer on the authenticity of a police transcript of an interview with a suspect?

Obviously, this list of questions can be exponentially stretched if we consider the many different ways in which insight into language and language-related phenomena is consequential to the development of the social sciences at large. For the past fifty years or so, sociolinguistics has evolved in this trajectory to document language use in specific contexts, reveal the complexity of linguistic diversity, explain linguistic and cultural change by uncovering numerous social mechanisms conditioning language use by people within and across contexts, and explain why/how different forms of social oppression (including linguistic inequalities and the death of

languages) emerge, endure and affect the communicative activities and the lives of language-minoritized communities everywhere.

Four distinct yet closely related conclusions can be drawn from the above observations: (1) if applied linguistics is invested in both problem-solving and critical endeavors, it must therefore rely on clear models of causality within the social realm (Sealey and Carter, 2004); (2) phenomena studied by applied linguists are not exclusively linguistic but are instead located at the interface of language and society (Bouchard, 2022); (3) understanding these phenomena requires scholars to creatively combine existing applied linguistic research insight with insight from other areas of the social sciences including anthropology, cognitive science, education, sociology, psychology, social geography and political science (Rampton, 1997); which inevitably means that (4) applied linguistics – as a profoundly interdisciplinary area of social research – requires a strong social ontology informed by the latest and most sophisticated perspectives within social theory (Bouchard, 2021). In other words, precisely because it is *applied*, applied linguistics needs to be anchored in solid ontological grounds to successfully achieve its scholarly and practical aims.

To date, however, the issue of causality within the social realm has not been dealt with successfully, or at least not explicitly, by sociolinguists or applied linguists, and I explore this important issue at different points throughout this paper. That being said, interdisciplinarity has certainly gained much more attention in the field recently, a much-welcomed development indeed. Areas of applied linguistics including contrastive linguistics, education and literacy, language pedagogy and language teacher education, second language acquisition, pragmatics, translation, language policy and planning, conversation analysis, discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics have, to date, demonstrated strongest involvement with interdisciplinarity. Partly resulting from such involvement, notable developments at the levels of theory, methodology and practical applications have been noted, including the design and implementation of more effective and context-sensitive language-in-education policies, as well as language policies and related strategies for curbing language shift and maintaining threatened languages and dialects. In turn, applied linguists have recently been able to offer more sophisticated insight into language, its real-world uses, and its interaction with other social phenomena (e.g., education, neoliberalism) to social scientists also interested in language-related issues including anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, psychologists and scholars involved in health services. Rampton (2001) explains that interdisciplinary engagement can (1) further contextualize research projects within social life and provide a sociologically layered viewpoint from the local to the global, (2) invite scholars to question underlying assumptions about social reality and the phenomena under investigative scrutiny, and (3) facilitate the creation and use of

novel conceptual tools and linkages, which can ultimately serve to improve data analysis and interpretation.

However, interdisciplinarity, it must be underlined, cannot be reduced (as it too often is) to a simple exercise of applying theories, concepts and models from one field to another without thorough ontological exploration and critical unpacking of the phenomena under investigation. Without this sort of conceptual work, interdisciplinary involvement easily becomes a problematic practice of metaphorical borrowings which can easily complicate the evolution of scientific and practical knowledge. In Bouchard (2021), I develop this point in detail with regards to the growing popularity of complex dynamic system theory (CDST) in applied linguistics. Mitigating my critique, however, is acknowledgment that CDST holds great potential for developments within and beyond applied linguistics (De Bot et al., 2013; Dörnyei, MacIntyre and Henry, 2015; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Hiver and Al Hoorie, 2020; Kostoulas and Stelma, 2016; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008; Mercer, 2014; Ramiah, 2014; Weideman, 2009), notably in terms of how CDST allows scholars to explain language-related phenomena – including language users – as complex, fluid, emergent, contingent and non-linear systems. CDST also shares numerous conceptual parallels with critical realism (Bouchard, 2021; Byrne and Callaghan, 2014; Cochran-Smith et al., 2014; Gerrits and Verweij, 2013; Mingers, 2014; Williams, 2021; Williams and Dyer, 2017). In its current state, however, CDST has yet to be fully integrated within applied linguistics because (a) not all CDST principles are relevant to the study of languages and language users, and (b) CDST has yet to develop a strong version of agency, and by extension, a viable approach to social critique central to critical applied linguistics (Bouchard, 2021). This critique, however, only serves to point towards the many conceptual and methodological possibilities ahead if applied linguists and sociolinguists invest greater energy in the development of a philosophy of applied linguistics.

The above observations regarding the object of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, the issue of causality, and interdisciplinarity, introduce the central arguments in this paper that (a) applied linguistics and sociolinguistics both require a robust social ontology (explained below) to overcome some of their conceptual and methodological problems and shortcomings, and (b) critical realism arguably offers such an ontology. In the next two sections, I hone in on some of the shortcomings of existing applied linguistic scholarship by looking at the two dominant empiricist tendencies in the field: *successionism* and *interpretivism*. These two dominant tendencies are empiricist because they overemphasize empirical data at the cost of principled and sociologically-informed conceptual work (Bouchard, 2021; Sealey and Carter, 2004). Empiricism – a prominent and problematic tendency within applied fields of inquiry marked by "conceptual blindness" – is the belief that all knowledge can only be derived from sense-experience. Stated differently, this

view holds that what is "real" can only be what human beings are able to perceive through their senses or measuring instruments. What is "perceived" is then posited as "evidence", which is then assumed to fully contain reality. From this angle, theory becomes suspicious, and within the interpretivist/poststructuralist strand especially, becomes a power-laden discourse with unnecessary ideological effects on the development of knowledge. As Firth and Wagner (1997: 288) argue with regard to applied linguists dismissing theory and limiting their perspectives to empirically gathered linguistic data, "at best it marginalizes, and at worst ignores, the social and the contextual dimensions of language." In sum, empiricism is an ideological perspective in that it paradoxically presents agency from the Foucauldian view of the decentered human subject while overemphasizing the importance of humans' sensory capacities. This latter stance leads empiricists to inflate the value of empirical data at the cost of other forms of data including paradigms, theories, models and concepts which, as I argue below, are necessary to the formulation of causal claims. Empiricism, of course, also limits scholars' ability to situate research outcomes within a broader scholarly landscape.

Successionist applied linguistics

Causality is, to say the least, a core component of all scientific projects, and remains a complex issue to tackle in both the natural and the social sciences. A comprehensive exploration of its philosophical roots and implications for applied linguistic research is therefore beyond the scope of this paper. There are, however, core principles which should be emphasized so as to justify the need for a renewed sociolinguistics along critical realist lines. I highlight some of them at different points in this paper when relevant.

Most scientists and theorists concerned with the issue of causality agree that causal relationships are not phenomena human beings can perceive directly through sense perception alone (Bhaskar, 1998a). What people can perceive empirically are the results, or traces, of causal relationships. For example, it is easy to accept at a conceptual level that teaching does (or at least can potentially) lead to learning, and that consequently teaching and learning share a causal relationship. After all, if this were not the case, teaching a language would be as consequential to language development as not teaching a language. However, no one can empirically identify the precise moment when learning happens, which means that we cannot empirically determine exactly when and how teaching causes or triggers this process. This has led most educational theorists to date to reach the general conclusion that learning is a complex, emergent and non-linear process of cognitive, intellectual, emotional and social development unfolding over time,

both within the minds of individual learners and as a socially shared phenomenon (Davis & Sumara, 2008; Mason, 2008; Murphy, 2013; Scott, 2010; Shipway, 2011). Despite our inability to apprehend learning empirically, we can be relatively sure that learning is an event which does take place, and that it is somehow causally related to our teaching activities, because traces or evidences of learning (i. e., improvement in competence levels, higher scores on tests, etc.) emerging after teaching "events" are empirically accessible and measurable. In short, learning, as a mechanism, is not an empirical phenomenon, although its effects are empirical.

More broadly speaking and with regards to social and natural phenomena in general, it is possible to claim that although causal relationships are not empirically accessible, they are nevertheless real because they have real effects on real people/objects/processes in real contexts. In other words, even if causality is not an empirical phenomenon, we nevertheless know that it exists through its effects and/or outcomes. Knowledge of causality must therefore be developed through the development and use of empirically-grounded theories and models. I revisit this important point in the section on critical realism near the end of this paper. The point to remember in this section is that, while most applied linguists – and most scholars working within applied fields of scientific inquiry – would agree with the above principles regarding causality, the temptation of empiricism remains strong, often leading to lukewarm commitment to causal explanation, or even more problematically, to causal claims drawn directly from empirical data analysis.

This is particularly the case with successionism, a view which adopts an external view of causality – the conclusion that because humans cannot observe causality directly, the only things they can comment on are sequences of observable events. Accordingly, if there is regularity in a particular sequencing of events (usually demonstrated statistically), the potential for causality exists. However, because successionism is an empiricist perspective, it assumes that because nothing in the data actually proves that a causal relationship exists, causal claims then become mere social constructions by the scientists themselves. Successionism expands on Hume's notion of causal events as constant conjunctions (sometimes referred to as the covering law of causality). Elder-Vass (2010: 41) summarizes the Humean view of causality thusly:

> Whenever an event of type A occurs, it is followed by an event of type B. The idea we form that there is a necessary connection between A events and B events – some sort of natural force that A has to produce B – cannot, according to Hume, be justified; all we have good reason to believe is that there is a constant conjunction of A's and B's.

Similarly, Porpora (2008: 200) explains that the Humean view of causality "conceives of a cause exclusively as an event rather than a structure. [...] The covering law simply links events: If one thing happens, then another thing happens. Thus, all that remains of causality is a conceptually thin empirical regularity, itself not much more than a covariation." Successionism, in other words, is more of a descriptive than an explanatory perspective because it does not actually allow scientists to make causal claims, but rather statements about sequences of events. In sum, it offers a much-weakened, or agnostic, view of causality.

Successionist social research is most often based on longstanding scientific notions including falsifiable hypotheses and dependent, independent and/or confounding variables, which are quantified and analyzed statistically, a process which again is not fully committed to the formulation of causal claims. Ragin (1987: 26) notes that the variable-based approach is a process in which,

> in a simple experiment an investigator compares an experimental group, which has been subjected to an experimental treatment, with a control group, which differs from the experimental group in only one respect – it does not receive the treatment. Only one factor, the treatment, is allowed to vary; all other conditions are held constant or randomized. If significant post-treatment differences between the experimental and control group emerge, these differences are credited to the experimental or treatment variable, and a tentative cause-effect sequence is established.

In agreement with this description, Sealey and Carter (2004: 91) present the variable analysis tradition in applied linguistic research in the following terms:

> In each case, a language learning "problem" is identified, and a number of factors are considered as potentially having a bearing on that problem. Investigations take the form of measurements of these factors and identification of their respective significance. The expression of each problem incorporates a fairly precise delineation of who is involved ("advanced Chinese EFL learners at tertiary level", "a small sample ... of high-school students in a rural community in Northern California", "first generation immigrant children"), and what the language learning enterprise is ("French second language performance", "[English] language achievement").

Monaghan and Boaz (2018) note that causality, being an external concern within successionism, is

studied by first establishing a rather limited set of variables of concern, a process which involves neutralizing the complexity of social phenomena under investigation. As the authors explain, successionist social science

> seeks to ascertain whether a program or intervention works to deliver a desired outcome. For those working in this tradition, the randomised controlled trial (RCT) is seen as the gold-standard method for determining this kind of causality. By randomly assigning participants to a group within a study, one of which will receive an intervention and one that will not, researchers working within this paradigm seek to establish what they argue to be causation (p. 175).

Although the successionist model has served the natural sciences well thus far, it poses considerable problems within the social sciences, which mainly explore complex, radically open, dynamic and emergent processes and systems (e. g., language learners, learner variations, pedagogy, language policy processes, socio-economic factors, etc.). Admittedly, the natural sciences also study complex and open systems, although natural systems such as the weather or nuclear fusion, for example, are certainly not as radically open or unpredictable as social systems such as reflexive human beings, groups, institutions and society. Even if building computers or robots to learn specific skills and predicting how they will learn are activities certainly within the capacities of scientists, predicting how a child will learn, act and map out his/her life course is a very different and considerably more complex endeavor. According to Monaghan and Boaz (2018: 175, emphasis mine),

> meta-analysis based on successionist logic is poor at dealing with complexity and context is purposefully excluded from such studies. [In statistical analysis], correlations are observed and cause is established post hoc through techniques measuring statistical significance. In both scenarios, however, the aim is to reveal a pure relationship uncluttered by extraneous and confounding factors through the elimination of bias.

When we study people within a complex, radically open and contingent social realm, however, the fairly precise delineations imposed by successionist variationist social research are, in practice, rather difficult to make, because the real-world phenomena research variables refer to (e. g., language learners, learning, motivation, language task, language instruction) are complex, fluid, nonlinear and emergent realities which cannot be captured entirely through statistical means, and

which require the application of time- and complexity-sensitive data gathering techniques and research methodologies. In sum, the successionist approach to applied linguistic research cannot avoid but do violence to the phenomena under investigation, through the oversimplification, decontextualization, neutralization, and interruption of empirical evidence in time and in their complexity, for the purpose of statistical measurement and other requirements imposed by the process of successionist scientific inquiry.

The variable-based approach – central to successionist research – is also limited by the fact that scholars must face stringent constraints imposed by academic journals and book publishers, a pressure which unfortunately leads many of them to present variables in their research projects as common-sense realities (e.g., *Everybody know what variables such as "task," "appropriateness" or "learner motivation" are, so I won't devote much space in this paper on these issues*), thus failing to capture important ontological properties of research variables, including their causal potential or lack thereof. As Larsen-Freeman (2015) explains with regard to learner motivation research and much of applied linguistic scholarship to date, the prevailing assumption regarding research variables is one of stasis rather than complexity: "Although characterizing individual differences as static was never stated explicitly, it is a fact that most researchers aimed to find correlations between certain learner characteristics theorized to be influential in [second language development] and language learning success at one time" (p. 12, emphasis mine). The problem is that complexity matters a great deal to the work applied linguists set out to achieve. When it comes to social phenomena such as language learning or cultural change in a broader sense, confounding factors, or "noise" in the data (often abstracted or removed from successionist, variable-based studies) are usually crucial elements to consider in the formulation of causal claims.

Another problem with the successionist model is that statistical regularities, or constant conjunctions in the data, are too often interpreted by researchers as the causal relationships themselves, leading some of them to conclude that causality can be extrapolated simply by "explaining away" the data. Specific to sociolinguistics, Rampton (2006: 275) notes that "quantitative research on language attitudes and variation provides very little insight into how people actually negotiate the symbols of social class in situated interaction [...] documentary research generally makes no claim to doing so." The complex realist sociologist Williams (2018: 27) is also critical of the use of the successionist model within the social sciences at large because its approach to explanation follows linear regression models "which aim to show the cause of an outcome by "explaining" as much of the statistical variance in the model by fitting the independent variables to the model to give the best "fit"." The problem, Williams argues, is that statistical patterns represent empirical traces of underlying processes rather than the processes

themselves. Because statistical regularities do not constitute actual evidence of causal links, they cannot in and of themselves explain those links. This leads the author to conclude that successionism unfortunately prioritizes empirical knowledge over necessary conceptual modelling of causality as a structure rather than a sequence of events. This argument draws from Easton's (2010: 118) point that the "constant conjunction of elements or variables is not a causal explanation or indeed an explanation of any kind. It is simply an atheoretical statement about the world. It doesn't answer the question why?" Again, the Humean model – core to successionism and manifested notably in variable-based research – is agnostic towards causality, which means that it merely possesses descriptive rather than explanatory potential. Stated differently, statistical relationships and patterns help researchers answer the question *What is my data?* rather than the more important scientific question *Why is my data like this and not otherwise?*

As discussed in the section on critical realism below, to provide explanatory statements, researchers should therefore conceptualize causality as a structure, thus as a real phenomenon, rather than a mere succession of events. I argue in Bouchard (2021: 43-44) that "results of statistical measurement cannot directly reveal causality [...] understanding causality in the social realm requires a theory of causality responsive to the specificities of social phenomena under scrutiny, and not simply the measurement of constant conjunctions in the Humean sense." If statistical correlations are not explained through the use of causal models, themselves grounded in robust ontological principles, causal claims essentially become mere conjectures.

The following example from the natural world makes this point obvious: We can easily find statistical correlations between warmer temperatures and higher digits on a thermometer, and colder temperatures and lower digits. However, without a causal model cognizant of the powers and properties of thermometers and the weather, there is effectively nothing stopping us from concluding that it is the thermometer which causes rises or drops in temperature, not the other way around. The fact that we know that the weather causes a thermometer to post higher or lower digits means that we are already equipped with a causal model from which we can successfully interpret the statistical relationship in causal terms. This causal model may seem common-sensical to us in the context of the weather example, but in a research project designed to explain the causal links between a particular teaching approach and learner motivation – i.e., between distinct, complex and emergent social phenomena – things are not as clear cut as they seem. To ground causal claims in a robust social ontology, the distinct and emergent properties and powers of people, processes and objects must first be accounted for at the level of theory.

Unfortunately, clear references to causal models, grounded in sound ontological principles, are rarely found in successionist applied linguistic research. Instead, we find numerous examples of

studies in reputed academic journals which claim, on the basis of observed statistical patterns and relationships, that a particular teaching approach or a particular language learning material, for example, is *causally* more effective than another, without providing ample ethnographic evidence and conceptual framing of how people interact with, process, reproduce and even challenge materials and/or pedagogies. To state the obvious: teaching approaches or language learning materials – as processes and/or inanimate material objects/processes – do not have agentive properties and powers to do anything in the real world. It is people who make things happen, in part, by drawing from, resisting, reproducing, dismissing or transforming resources such as teaching approaches or language learning materials. In turn, the causal effects of structural and cultural resources such as teaching approaches or language learning materials are activated through agentive involvement, and usually come in the form of constraints and enablements. As such, to study the effects of language learning materials or particular teaching strategies on other phenomena (e.g., classroom language use, learner motivation, language learning) is very much a question of documenting and explaining the beliefs, decisions and situated actions of learners/teachers as reflexively endowed human agents – who are causally efficacious – as they face the constraining and enabling potentials of structural and cultural resources. While most scholars would agree with this explanation of the structure-culture-agency interaction, it is surprising to note how, in much of successionist applied linguistic research, processes and/or inanimate material objects (mot often operationalized and neutralized into research variables) are endowed with powers to do things in the real world which they do not actually possess. In short, the problem here is ontological, not empirical, and must consequently be dealt with at the level of theory.

Although the successionist model of causality is only one among many approaches to understanding causality (see Illari & Williamson, 2011; Kincaid, 2012; Paul, Hall & Collins, 2004; Pearl, 2000; Salmon, 1998; Tooley, 2001; Woodward, 2003 for discussions), its prevalence in the social sciences, and in applied linguistics in particular, is undeniable. Supporting Sealey and Carter's (2004) claim that much of applied linguistic scholarship has adopted the successionist model of causality, Lazaraton (2000, 2005) found that, in the 1990s, approximately 90% of studies published in leading applied linguistics journals adopted some form of statistical analysis of quantified variables to justify causal claims. Roughly a decade later, Loewen et al. (2014) provided further evidence to support Sealey and Carter's observation. Although not all statistically-grounded applied linguistic studies to date follow the successionist model, it is clear from the evidence analyzed by Sealey and Carter and corroborated by Lazaraton and Loewen et al. that successionism is a wide-spread – and problematic – tendency in our field.

The successionist model has not been as influential within sociolinguistics, although the variable-based approach remains prominent, particularly in terms of the often reductive and mechanistic ways in which social categories such as age, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, are operationalized and studied as potential causal forces. The most obvious argument against this tendency in sociolinguistics is that the social world and the people who populate it cannot be easily sorted into neat categories developed by sociologists, nor are people comfortable being assigned to and defined by fixed social categories (Rampton, 2001). In Bouchard (2021: 39), I explain that social categories, as variables, are instead ontologically very fluid and negotiable entities: "categories such as gender or age, being culturally laden concepts, (a) are discursive constructions themselves, and therefore (b) are not inherent features of research participants, and (c) mean different things to different people, including researchers and research participants."

The problem with much of variable-based sociolinguistics is, again, essentially ontological. For one, there are different kinds of variables and social categories, and these differences have important implications for causal explanation. For example, most social scientists have learned early in their careers that social categories can be *social collectives*, which partly depend on personal choice (e.g., being a language learner or a teacher), or *social aggregates*, which are related to factors somewhat beyond people's volition (e.g., belonging to a social class/culture/ethnicity, being of a certain age). Because it is people who are causally efficacious rather than objects or processes, and that their ability to cause things in the real world very much depends on their reflexive powers – i.e., their capacity to make sense of the world and their place in it – accounting for personal choice (or more specifically accounting for people's reflexive engagement with the world) is crucial when considering social categories in the formulation of causal statements. As I explain in Bouchard (2021: 40), "while a social aggregate is not formed out of reflexive human commitment by participants to particular projects or realities (indeed, they are often imposed by researchers), a social collective is to a large extent an emergent product of decisions made by people." This means that explaining phenomena such as behaviors, beliefs or learner motivation by drawing direct causal links with age, socio-economic status, sex, ethnicity or cultural affiliation is highly reductive. Stated differently, no one can reasonably make the argument *I am Japanese, or I am in my 50s, or I am a woman, or I am part of the middle-class, therefore A, B and C*. Up until recently, age was a commonly researched variable in applied linguistics, although fortunately with the introduction of more sociologically sophisticated conceptual insight this brand of research has more or less faded away. The point to remember here is that social scientists should account for variables and social categories in terms of their distinct and emergent properties and powers to

ascertain precisely what kind of effects they might (or might not) have on other phenomena. More importantly, they must identify the locus of causal powers – i.e., people and their reflexive engagement with the world – when formulating causal claims.

To overcome the shortcomings of variable-based sociolinguistics, I hone in on the issue of reflexivity as powerful causal force by arguing in Bouchard (2021: 37) that variables "must be conceptualized as emergent products of [people's] ongoing mediated interaction with structural and cultural constraints and enablements, in light of their goals and aspirations, all within a contingent social realm." This view considers the complexity and radical openness of social phenomena, and draws from Juarrero's (1999: 75) complexity approach to the study of human agency, specifically her complexity view of variables in the social sciences:

> The type of causal relations required to explain the relationship between organisms and their environment – and its past – must be able to account for the way organisms simultaneously participate in and shape the contextual niche in which they are situated, and to which their dispositions are attuned and respond. Developmentally as well as evolutionarily, parts interact to create systems that in turn affect their components: interlevel causality, in other words.

Juarrero's complexity-informed approach to human agency in social research, in this sense, considerably undermines the foundation of variable-based research, for if interlevel causality is considered, then multiple interacting causal mechanisms/links must consequently be studied. Ragin (1987: 27) justifies this viewpoint thusly:

> Rarely does an outcome of interest to social scientists have a single cause. [...] causes rarely operate in isolation. Usually, it is the combined effect of various conditions, their intersection in time and space, that produces a certain outcome. Thus, social causation is often both multiple and conjunctural, involving different combinations of causal conditions.

What we can draw from these observations is that the task of explanation in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics involves more than uncovering statistical correlations or reducing complex phenomena to "measurable" variables. To capture the complexity in our empirical data, we need to use qualitative methods suited to the study of people and contextual influences over time. This characterization of applied linguistic research as profoundly qualitative is not, as Lazaraton (1995,

2005) posits, an unfortunate result of the field's said inability to define its research goals, methods, and paradigms, but rather a necessary recognition that applied linguistics is a social scientific field which deals with complex, emergent, radically open and fluid realities unfolding over time and in context.

The critique of successionist applied linguistics in this section, however, is not aimed at discrediting the use of statistical data or variable-based analysis outright; rather, it specifically targets how, in successionist social research, statistical patterns and relationships tend to be interpreted by scholars to make causal claims. In other words, the problem is not with the use of quantitative methodologies or variables for descriptive purposes (i.e., answering the questions *What is my data?* and *In what ways can I label and categorize my data to gain a clearer understanding of it?*), but how they are appropriated for the purpose of explanation (i.e., answering the question *Why is my data like this and not otherwise?*). From a sociological perspective, Sørensen (1998: 239) notes the prominence of this error thusly:

> The discipline of statistics is a branch of applied mathematics and has no social theory whatsoever. Statisticians never claim otherwise. It is the sociologists' use of statistics that is at fault. Statistics provides tools for estimating mathematical models representing a conception of social processes. Unfortunately, sociologists [...] have become less, rather than more, competent at translating theoretical ideas into models to be estimated by statistical techniques. Sociologists therefore estimate ad hoc statistical models of social processes, usually additive models that often represent poor theories of the phenomena being investigated.

My critique of successionism in applied linguistics is also aimed at highlighting the marked tendency among applied linguists to neutralize complexity for research purposes. Again, not all quantitatively-oriented applied linguists and sociolinguists adhere to successionist principles. Nevertheless, it is important to state that the conceptual and methodological problems identified in this section are very common in our field and that they undermine its quality and legitimacy.

At the level of description, however, statistical analysis has the unique potential to reveal insight into phenomena occurring on a broader demographic scale, as well as broader sociological phenomena individual humans, given their physical and cognitive constraints, simply cannot perceive. The main problem here is that many quantitative applied linguistic studies consider multiple sample figures (e.g., variables or traits) in relation to very small numbers of participants (e.g., n=20 or n=30, usually students in one university class). Researchers then apply powerful

statistical instruments such as one-way, factorial or mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) – which again are based on the concept of linear regression seen by Williams (2018) as somewhat inappropriate to the study of social phenomena – to then establish the effect of an independent variable, or the interaction between multiple variables. The main solution would then be for applied linguists employing quantitative instruments to study much larger sets of empirical data gathered from much larger populations (e.g., n=300 or n=500, depending on how many variables are under scrutiny).

Other clear benefits of statistical analysis include its ability to strengthen description, its ability to test theories, and its capacity to reveal traces of social structures and potential underlying causal mechanisms including notably systems of social inequality. Of equal relevance to applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics – a largely quantitative, computer-based analysis of large corpuses of spoken and written texts – has been particularly useful to researchers in their attempts to reveal situated language use as also possessing systemic features (an empirical discovery which contradicts claims about language use made by many interactionists and poststructuralists). In short, as with any other branches of the social sciences, the use of statistical analysis – and quantitative research methodologies in a broader sense – helps strengthen research insight in ways simply not afforded by the hermeneutic approach. That being said, the misuse of statistical analysis and the reduction of complex social phenomena to rigid variables in the formulation of explanatory statements – which are outcomes of successionism's empiricist heritage – are considerable problems applied linguists need to overcome.

Interpretivist applied linguistics

Interpretivist applied linguistic research tends to be qualitatively-oriented by focusing on the interpretation and critique of discourse practices, identity work and ideologies, and by prioritizing the construction and interpretation of meaning by individuals in context (Rampton, 1997). Increasingly dominant in contemporary sociolinguistics, interpretivism most often comes under labels such as social constructivism, poststructuralism, critical pedagogy and socio-cultural theory, and is most often presented as a cutting-edge critical perspective (for examples of such claims, see García et al., 2017; Kramsch, 1998, 2015; Kubota, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 1999; Martin Rojo, 2017; Pennycook, 2001; Shohamy, 2006). Cohen et al. (2007) explains that interpretivist social research aims to understand, explain, and critically demystify social reality, and particularly social inequality and oppression, from various epistemological perspectives. Although interpretivism shares empiricist tendencies with successionism, it is more specifically aligned with postmodernist

principles rather than modernist and/or positivist principles, which are more common in successionist social research.

In most of my publications to date, I have highlighted some of the important conceptual and empirical contributions of the interpretivist strand of sociolinguistics, particularly its novel views on power, its rich analysis of society and social phenomena as social constructions, and its view of discourse as important causal force in the construction of social realities. On the other hand, I have been rather forceful in my critique of the marked tendency in interpretivist sociolinguistics to (a) reduce society and the phenomena within it to discourse, and (b) claim to offer a cutting-edge critical perspective. My critique has, in a broader sense, targeted the hopeless relativism interpretivist sociolinguistics usually leads to. Of greater concern, interpretivist sociolinguistics' marked adherence to the poststructuralist notion of a decentered subject has produced, in my opinion, insufficient analyses of human agency (see Bouchard & Glasgow, 2019, and Bouchard & Glasgow, 2022, for discussions) and, by extension, provided inconsistent critical argumentations. Specifically, I have questioned claims made by interpretivist sociolinguists about language and about people's said powers to extricate themselves from systems of oppression by merely acknowledging diversity and engaging in alternative discursive activities. All of this has led me to agree with applied linguistic scholars including notably Block (2015), Rampton (1997, 2006) and Sealey and Carter (2004), and question the neoliberal undercurrent motivating interpretivist sociolinguistic scholarship.

Although critique is necessary to the improvement of scientific knowledge, alternatives must also be contemplated. Indeed, what attracted me most to critical realism is its commitment to objective knowledge, based on recognition of the transitive-intransitive dimensions of social life and social research. I explain later that recognition of the transitive-intransitive distinction posits critical realism as an anti-relativist ontology built largely on a critique of the shortcomings of mid- and late-twentieth-century postmodernism (which I portray perhaps simplistically in this section under the broader umbrella of interpretivism). I also argue in the next section that critical realism provides convincing conceptual alternatives to postmodernist relativism by recognizing the mediated nature of human interpretation and understanding (a central postmodernist principle) on the one hand, and (contra postmodernism) the need for natural and social scientists to maintain their commitment to objective knowledge on the other. In this paper, without reiterating my critique of interpretivist sociolinguistics at length, I focus more specifically on its empiricist tendencies and how they complicate sociolinguistic inquiry and critique.

Interpretivist sociolinguistics is empiricist in that it prioritizes the voices of participants as the most reliable data about situated language uses and language-related social experiences. Part

of this stance is the view that theoretical modelling of analytical categories and discussions about causality are suspicious, a view justified by the argument that theories reflect the political and ideological realities of the researchers rather than the research objects or participants. More radical although still prominent in the field is the view that theory is extraneous and not necessarily relevant to the task of understanding situated linguistic and cultural experiences of flesh-and-blood language users. Foucault (1980) provides perhaps the most oft-quoted justification for this view with the argument that theory is a product of scientific discourse which has more to do with the power structures within academia than the complex empirical phenomena observed in contexts.

From this range of assumptions, interpretivist sociolinguists then prioritize participants' emic viewpoints, as opposed to the etic perspectives of the researchers. Accordingly, the emic viewpoint cannot be theorized or inferred: it can only be apprehended through empirical means by recording what people say in context. Discourse data is thus gathered usually through surveys and interviews, and on rarer occasions, through field notes and other ethnographic data gathering techniques. This level of reality – the empirical layer of reality – is most often understood by interpretivist sociolinguists under the category of "practice", which is then posited *contra* theory. Kramsch (2015: 455), an important figure in both applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, epitomizes this empiricist tendency thusly:

> For me, applied linguistics was never the application of linguistic theory or any other theory to the real-life problem of language learning and teaching [...] it has been instead the practice of language study itself, and the theory that could be drawn from that practice [...] Rather than 'applied linguistics', I would have called it 'practical language studies.'

A widely agreed upon viewpoint in both applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, we can also notice in Kramsch's statement the assumption that discursive evidence constitutes direct empirical evidence of the fluid and contextualized linguistic and cultural experiences of human agents, and that consequently discourse in context successfully contains this important element of practice, thus constituting the main, if not the only, source of evidence of relevance to sociolinguistic research.

Methodologically, the use of narrative inquiry has become particularly prominent within interpretivist sociolinguistics, with some claiming that narrative inquiry not only provides rich insight into situated experience but also has the potential to reveal how people relate to structural

and cultural realities. Norton and De Costa (2018: 104), for example, argue that narrative inquiry illuminates "identity negotiation, given that narratives are co-constructed and shaped by social, cultural, and historical conventions." Other approaches to the study of discourse in context include conversation analysis, linguistic ethnography, and critical discourse analysis. The *Routledge Handbook of Language and Identity*, edited by Preece (2016), offers an impressive catalog and ample discussions related to this strand of applied linguistic research. It is worth noting, however, that these approaches are certainly not grounded in the same conceptual principles as narrative inquiry. Indeed, and quite unlike narrative inquiry, both linguistic ethnography and critical discourse analysis follow many realist principles outlined later in this paper.

To facilitate narrative inquiry, ethnographic methodologies are used to encourage participants to formulate discursive accounts of their lived experiences, and express personalized understandings, beliefs and hopes. Morgan (2007: 952, emphasis mine) explains that, in interpretivist social science, "texts are deconstructed, read against themselves in order to reveal their aporias (i.e., self-generated paradoxes) and to expose the techniques and social interests in their construction. [...] the determination of subjectivity [is conceptualized] as partial or incomplete in that discourses also create the possibilities for autonomy and resistance." This marked emphasis on participant-produced texts is therefore based on the assumption – central to social constructivism and more radical paradigms such as poststructuralism – that local and broader social realities only occupy a virtual existence within the social realm, and that they are instantiated essentially through people's discursive practices on the ground. This viewpoint not only makes discussions of structure and culture largely irrelevant to social research; it also makes discourse both the context within which, and the material with which, social phenomena become possible (Sealey and Carter, 2004). Clearly, this conflationary conceptual approach poses considerable problems for the formulation of causal claims, for if we cannot distinguish between structure, culture and agency, or between context, objects, people and processes – or any other variables involved in causal relationships for that matter – how can we understand their causal interplay? Stated differently: If context, objects, people and processes are simply different versions or aspects of the same thing, and if structure and culture do not exist except through the discourses and actions of people on the ground, why have different terms for them, or talk about them at all?

Symptomatic of the conflationary (because empiricist) tendencies in interpretivist sociolinguistics is the common use (and often creative production) of complex and abstract terminologies without proper conceptual unpacking. For example, we can denote in many recent interpretivist studies the use of vague terms such as "ways of seeing", "ways of being", hybridity, fluidity and

transdisciplinarity without proper conceptual unpacking. Another example can be found in the above statement by Kramsch, in which it is rather unclear what the author means by "theory" when referring to "linguistic theory": Is the author talking about a paradigm, a social theory, a middle range theory related to a specific language-related phenomenon, a conceptual model, a concept, or a general notion abstracted from the study of empirical evidence? Distinguishing between paradigms, theories, concepts and models is an important task in the development of causal explanation because they differ in terms of levels of abstraction, and therefore have different relationships with, and explanatory potential with regards to, empirical evidence. Instead, theory is quite often discussed by interpretivist sociolinguists in very general terms, then posited *contra* empirical evidence in dichotomous fashion. More radical interpretivists simply dismiss theory as an abstract view of the world developed by armchair scholars, unrelated to "practice" or the "real world".

The main problem with this strategy – something which is ironically emphasized by interpretivists and poststructuralists themselves – is that all notions or elements in sociolinguistic research projects (e. g., practice, empirical evidence, task, learner, variety, identity, power, transdisciplinarity, etc.) are concept-laden. Indeed, and as poststructuralists rightfully argue, the very language we use as scientists cannot provide a pure and unmediated view of empirical evidence, because academic discourse is itself a cultural product developed through collective conceptual and empirical engagement by scholars over long periods of time. That being said, the fact that science is undeniably a social construction does not necessarily mean that it is false or hopelessly biased, or that the only thing we can do as sociolinguists is to "talk about the ways we talk". Rather – and this point is central to critical realism – the facts that (a) scientists do not have direct and unmediated access to objective truth (a notion developed further below), that (b) scientists nevertheless are capable of gaining relatively reliable knowledge of and insight into objective truth, and that (c) scientists have come to specific conclusions about the world (as opposed to any other conclusions), all lead to the important realization that theory and practice are not opposed realities: They are involved in a complex causal interaction which ultimately shapes scientific discourse and the production of knowledge. Stated differently, the lukewarm approach to, and even dismissal of, theory within interpretivist sociolinguistics is a dangerously counterproductive strategy.

In addition, interpretivism is empiricist by claiming too much on the basis of limited discursive evidence gathered from surveys and interviews. Too often are statements by participants interpreted by scholars as direct reflections of objects and processes beyond their grasp or ability to fully perceive. Granted, people do manage to achieve a great deal through

conversations and other discursive activities. Both Rampton (2006) and Agha (2007), for example, convincingly demonstrate how people use language in combination with other semiotic elements to structure, reproduce, resist and transform social relationships. At no point in their argumentations, however, do they reach the radical poststructuralist argument that language "constitutes" society. This problematic conflation is grounded in the twin assumptions that discourse (as apprehended through textual evidence) is the central constitutive force in the social realm, and that it can be apprehended "on the ground" rather than "out there". In many of my publications to date, I have reiterated Fairclough's (2010) critique of this particular problem as a matter of "reading off" ideology from the data – a practice far too common within sociolinguistics of drawing conclusions about broad and often very abstract phenomena such as institutional forces and ideologies directly from survey and interview statements. Williams (1977: 128) identifies this problematic tendency among social scientists as "the immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products [...] the reduction of the social to fixed forms." Norton (2000) provides a notorious and widely-cited example of interpretivist sociolinguistics through a longitudinal study of immigrant women in Canada and their experiences as language learners, as documented almost exclusively through interview data. Sealey and Carter (2004) provide a trenchant critique of Norton's work by arguing that "there is no intrinsic reason why these accounts should be assumed to provide reliable information about, for example, the social structures which may be constraining or facilitating language learning processes." The authors' recommendation is that, as social scientists, sociolinguists should be mindful of the fact that multiple forces and mechanisms beyond local contexts (e.g., the financial system, social class divisions, globalization) are indeed consequential to people's situated lives (Longshore Smith, 2006), but that these exist to a large extent beyond these people's control or ability to fully comprehend them. Consequently, they must the theorized rather than extrapolated directly from empirical evidence.

Drawing conclusions about structural and cultural phenomena on the basis of participants' stated views – as is the custom in narrative inquiry for example – is mistaken. Norton, Kramsch and similarly minded sociolinguists are mistaken in assuming that structure, culture and underlying generative mechanisms in society can be understood largely through people's sense-making activities in context and at specific points in time, or that theory – the very tool we use to formulate our understandings of these broad and abstract phenomena – is inconsequential or extraneous to social research concerned with understanding the lived experiences of language users. In the section on critical realism below, I extend this argument to argue that, *contra* the theory-practice divide advocated by many interpretivist sociolinguists, theory is what we need to

understand phenomena beyond empirical evidence – including causality. I strengthen this argument by pointing out that practice – seemingly the main focus in interpretivism – is inherently about causality, and that because causality is not an empirical phenomenon, we therefore depend on theory to understand and guide practice on the ground. Stated differently, and again *contra* interpretivism, understanding the complexity of people's lived experiences requires more than people's understanding of meaning in interaction: it requires active and ongoing conceptual work by scholars over time, something which cannot be achieved exclusively through the study of empirical data.

Related to this practice of "reading off" identity positionings, ideologies and other social phenomena directly from discourse data, there is also the tendency among interpretivist sociolinguists to assume that all aspects of society (institutions, ideologies, power, structure, agency, etc.) are discursive products. This tendency to reduce society to a single phenomenon – discourse – is most often manifested in common claims that the study of structure and agency, or macro and micro phenomena, is a remnant of antiquated scientific epistemologies. Heller (2001), for example rejects the "macro-micro debate" in sociolinguistic research as a problematic dichotomy with the argument that "conceptualising social life in terms of a dichotomy implies that there are different types of data for each, equally observable (or not, as the case may be), and that, in addition, the linkages should be identifiable. And yet, empirical work fails to identify such types" (p. 212). Three conceptual mistakes can be noted in her statement: (1) presenting structure and agency as dichotomous phenomena, something which most strands of social theory and approaches to social research concerned with the structure-agency relationship do not actually advocate; (2) limiting the scope of social research to the study of empirical data; and (3) assuming that people and social institutions, for example, are only distinguishable in scalar terms. Problem (3) becomes rather obvious if we consider that people and social structures are very different things. For example, people cannot be standardized, streamlined or dismantled (unlike institutions), and institutions cannot be reflexive, irrational or emotional (unlike humans). In sum, Heller's scalar view of macro and micro phenomena – rather common in interpretivist sociolinguistics – is rooted in an unsatisfactory social ontology, or what critical realists commonly refer to as conflationary thinking.

The assumption by interpretivist sociolinguists that society and social phenomena can be studied comprehensively through a study of discourse (particularly situated discourse) is an extreme interpretation of Berger and Luckmann's (1967) influential notion of social construction which, in part, helps scientists discern between social and natural phenomena. Simply put, a social construction (e.g., money, the banking system, power, norms, education, law, gender, ethnicity,

social inequalities) depends on contingent aspects of humans' social selves. It posits that (a) social phenomena could not have existed had people not built them, (b) people build social phenomena largely (although not exclusively) through their discursive activities, and (c) social constructions can thus be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed otherwise. The extreme version of this theory within sociolinguistics is that discourse is, again, both the context within which, and the material with which, social phenomena become possible (Sealey and Carter, 2004). This view is extreme for two reasons: (1) contexts, tools and products are conflated within the same phenomenon, making them indistinguishable in causal terms, and (2) it assumes that mere changes in discursive activities are sufficient for the achievement of complex and far-ranging phenomena such as institutional power and projects such as social emancipation. What adherents to this extreme viewpoint miss are conceptual accounts of how discourse is profoundly related to both objective and material phenomena, and despite people's attempts to resist and improve their existence, why social oppression and inequality usually persists in our world.

In light of this, interpretivist sociolinguists are mistaken in assuming that situated discourse practice – as empirically apprehensible data – constitutes sufficient data to uncover complex sociolinguistic realities, because language use does not (a) exhaust all social possibilities, notably the emergent, antecedent and enduring properties of culture and structure, nor does it (b) inevitably or exclusively construct all possible social relationships and phenomena. Stated simply, society is not merely a large (or cumulative) conversation happening in multiple contexts at once, but rather the complex and emergent outcome of the relationship between structure, culture and agency both in the moment and over long stretches of time, within and across contexts. Importantly, discourse (whether situated or antecedent and enduring) is only one of the many consequential causal forces in this process. The facts that people cannot become anything they want to be at any time, or that they cannot change their lives or extricate themselves from oppressive situations simply by learning, using, or modifying their use of language, constitute enough empirical evidence to demonstrate this point. As such, also missing in interpretivist sociolinguistics is analysis of the causal relationship between objects, language, discourse, people, institutions, culture, structure, and other phenomena located within and across multiple strata of the social realm.

There are many other problems with interpretivist sociolinguistics both related to and beyond its empiricist tendencies. In Bouchard (2021), I note that interpretivist sociolinguists (a) show a marked preference for survey and interview data (which, let's remember, represent people's understandings of and beliefs about particular phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves), (b) often develop ontologically flattened views of social processes, and (c) tend to

resist the notion of objective knowledge itself. I also identify a neoliberalist penchant within interpretivist sociolinguistics, particularly its adherence to the conceptually incomplete idea that identity positioning – a core variable in this strand of research – can, again, be comprehensively uncovered through the study of discourse. This idea suggests that people – as generators of discourse – are capable of embodying a range of identity options through their discursive activities alone. According to this principle, if one embodies the identity of a socially oppressed individual, he/she can transcend this identity – and by extension the oppressive force he/she is subjected to – by altering his/her discourse practices. A dramatic example of this sort of sociolinguistic analysis is, again, provided by Kramsch (2012), who in her critique of the notion of authenticity endows human beings with the capacity to essentially do as they please: "Is there still such a thing as an inauthentic or illegitimate 'impostor' in a world in which you can be anything you want to be?" (p. 484). As I ask in Bouchard (2021: 71), "*If people can be anything they want to be, why is there enduring systemic oppression of the many by the few? Why are so many young people unable to go to any school and get any job they want? Are homeless people choosing to be so*?" Specific to sociolinguistics, one might also ask: *If minoritized languages and varieties around the world are disappearing at an alarming rate – leading some sociolinguists such as Skutnabb-Kangas (2020) to claim that a linguistic genocide, or linguicide, is currently unfolding in today's world – is the solution merely for members of linguistically and culturally minoritized groups to communicate differently?*

In short, the neoliberalist penchant in interpretivist sociolinguistics fails to (a) incorporate the notion of oppression as a *system*, and by extension (b) consider the interaction between discourse and other non-discursive phenomena in the social realm, and from a sociological angle, (c) frame analysis within the understanding that the structure-culture-agency relationship is consequential to the production of social reality. Although we are certainly not cultural "play dough", nor are we robots mindlessly following structural input, there are nevertheless powerful underlying causal mechanisms in society which condition our choices and preferences in profound ways. Failure to recognize this basic fact can only lead to incomplete sociological and sociolinguistic insight.

This totalizing (i.e., ontologically flattened) view of identity-as-discursive-product is also neoliberalist in the sense that it conceptualizes identities as consumable states of being. This idea borrows much from rational choice theory, a rather popular conceptual perspective into human agency within contemporary sociolinguistics which suggests that human agents are rational beings who choose identities from a range of available options and linguistic repertoires, depending on their purposes (Coupland, 2001). Again from a sociological angle, Archer and Tritter (2000: 15) underscore the neoliberalist tendency within rational choice theory by arguing that it

fails to explain how people's decisions and actions are profoundly conditioned by structure and culture:

> Rational choice theory and neoliberalism, when applied to the public or private sphere, have stressed the need for the definition and measurement of individualized outcome indicators. Such an approach promotes models and predictions of action that increasingly become defined by what they can measure [...] Such an approach, which prioritizes instrumental rationality above all else, individualizes, isolates and insulates decisions and actions from a social and historical context.

We can extend this argument to make the point that the neoliberalist emphasis on the definition and measurement of individualized outcome indicators, as advocated by rational choice theory, is very much a prominent feature of contemporary approaches to language education around the world. We only have to think of the common subdivision of language development into distinct and measurable skills, and more obviously, the centrality of the language testing industry and its powerful washback effects on language-in-education policy, curricular initiatives and language teaching/learning in context, to understand the almost hegemonic influence of neoliberalism in language pedagogy.

Vocal critics of the neoliberalist penchant in contemporary sociolinguistics include Block (2015), Block, Gray and Holborow (2012) and Pennycook (2021), who each in their own ways make powerful arguments about the need in both sociolinguistics and applied linguistics to engage in critical evaluation and transformation of existing language pedagogies and, more broadly speaking, current social class distribution practices in relation to situated language use. Skeggs (1997) notes that, contrary to a commonly shared opinion among interpretivist social scientists, greater attention to the issue of social class does not imply greater emphasis on structure at the detriment of agency, but rather offers the potential for a novel understanding of social class as part of the complex subjectivities and varied ways of being of individuals and groups in context. Although without an explicit focus on social class division, Agha (2007) provides a detailed and timely analysis of how language serves as both tool and means through which people perform and reproduce unequal social relationships through their everyday discursive activities.

In this section, I have been particularly harsh towards interpretivist sociolinguists, notably the works of Kramsch, Norton and Heller, largely because their important contributions to and impact on the field calls for greater critical scrutiny. It is necessary, however, to reiterate and further highlight the fact that sociolinguistics – interpretivist or otherwise – has perhaps been

most actively engaged with sociological issues and principles debated and developed within social theory over the past century. Furthermore, interpretivist sociolinguistics has certainly provided rich accounts of the more granular aspects of language pedagogy and use in context, thus revealing valuable insight into human agency in relation to language use. It has also discussed complex social and linguistic phenomena, and has presented convincing accounts of how discourse is used by people to shape, reproduce and transform social reality (Agha, 2007; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Elder-Vass, 2012; Parker, 1998; Rampton, 2006; Searle, 1995). Although I am not in full agreement with his praise, Weideman (2015) notes that interpretivist applied linguistics has also introduced more theoretical and methodological plurality in the field by creating

> a willingness to acknowledge differences and variety in theoretical approach within disciplines. It thus introduced greater tolerance and recognition of a diversity in belief and commitment in scholarly work, and in the adoption of paradigms that express those commitments. Such recognition of variation took as its first point of departure that science cannot escape self-interest and institutional coercion, and is therefore never neutral. The reason for taking non-neutrality as starting point, in opposition to the commitments of modernism, was the demonstrable immersion of disciplinary work in political power plays within disciplines, universities and the academic publishing industry. (p. 4)

However, the contribution of interpretivist sociolinguistics contains fundamental problems and contradictions which need to be addressed. As Elder-Vass (2012: 77) rightfully argues, "when writers claim that some social phenomenon is socially constructed, we are entitled to ask what exactly it is that is doing the constructing", and as the ironic title of Hacking's (2000) insightful and entertaining book asks, "*The social construction of what?*" Without a more robust and sociologically-grounded theory of agency, structure and culture, and of their complex and enduring causal interaction, interpretivist sociolinguistics unfortunately falls short in dealing with these crucial issues. Perhaps more alarmingly, the inherent relativism within interpretivist sociolinguistics has led many of its adherents to adopt conceptually problematic views of the social world, of discourse, of identity and power, of causality, and of the very purposes of scientific inquiry and social critique. In the process, this has revealed a problematic neoliberalist penchant in interpretivist sociolinguistics which, in my view, directly contradicts the consensus among interpretivist sociolinguists that their approach offers a cutting-edge critical perspective.

If our prime (although certainly not exclusive) aim in applied linguistics is to improve

language education and use on the ground, and if sociolinguistics is essentially about describing, explaining and critiquing what goes on at the interface of language and society, we need solid models to explain what causes things to happen in society, specifically the elements in our data which possess causal efficacy: Is it language as a relatively stable system of linguistic rules and symbiotic elements? Is it how this linguistic system is used by people on the ground? Is it people rather than the various cultural resources they draw from through their discursive activities? Is it a specific language teaching approach, or perhaps the materials teachers use? Other important questions also include: Are people always talking and acting as rational beings, or are they also engaging with the world guided by impulses and habits? And if so, how can we determine one from the other when analyzing empirical evidence? If we claim that "good practice" – i.e., practice which serves people's interests and ensures social emancipation – ultimately comes down to people's decisions and actions, specifically which properties and powers of people and their engagement with the world matter? Motivation? Beliefs? Habitus and the routines we develop and reinforce over time? If so, how do these relate to empirically observable discursive acts and other types of social acts? Even more importantly, how do we account for the obvious fact that everybody learns/teach/uses languages differently, with different and often unexpected results, in different contexts and over time? Finally, and from a wider sociological angle, why do linguistic genocide and systemic forms of inequalities persist in our world, and what can we do to undermine and replace these?

As a sociolinguist and language teacher, it is my firm conviction that these are precisely the questions that need to be addressed both at the empirical and conceptual levels if we are to account for complex and broader processes such as language learning, language education, language-in-education policy, as well as linguistic and cultural change. It is also my conviction that these questions cannot be answered (a) simply through statistical analysis, (b) by simply interpreting people's beliefs, as revealed in survey and/or interview data at specific points in time, or (c) by reducing social reality to discourse. Instead, there are profound questions about the ontological properties of people, objects, phenomena and variables in our research projects which need to be asked, and which can only be understood through active, sustained, interdisciplinary, and of course empirically-grounded conceptual work.

Critical realism and depth ontology

To equip sociolinguistic research with a robust ontology, I argue in this section that critical realism, with its depth ontology, anti-empiricist stance, and commitment to objective knowledge, is

necessary. Part of the critical realist approach to research is understanding of the principle discussed earlier that empirical data (e.g., statistical data, participants' stated views), although crucial to every aspect of the research process, does not "speak for itself". Against successionism, interpretivism – and notably Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory – critical realism holds that empirical data analysis is insufficient for explanation (i.e., the task of accounting for causal links) directly, given the stratified and radically open nature of social reality. Theory thus becomes central to linking empirical data analysis to the formulation of causal claims. It is precisely this principle which allow critical realist scholars to avoid the empiricist trap.

Once this anti-empiricist stance is accepted, critical realism becomes easier to grasp. Firstly, however, it is crucial to distinguish between scientific realism and Realism (with a capital "R") in literary critique. Drawing its origins principally in nineteenth century French literature, the Realist movement offers a counterpoint to Romanticism by providing (said) truthful and relatable literary subject matters. This focus on "real life" in literature is, in this sense, very much aligned with the kind of empiricism discussed earlier in this paper, and contrasts significantly from the transcendental viewpoint offered by critical realism and other forms of realism in both the natural and social sciences.

Secondly, it is also important to identify different versions of realism. These include (in no particular order) ontological realism, metaphysical realism, semantic realism, epistemological realism, social realism, complex realism, axiological realism, institutional realism, naturalistic realism, global and local realism, etc. (see Haig & Evers, 2016, and Harré, 1986, for discussions). Despite some minor and other more noticeable differences, all these versions offer similarly stratified ontologies, and are all more or less aligned with the principles outlined in the following sections.

Thirdly, it is necessary to clarify what critical realists mean by the "real". Roy Bhaskar, a central figure in critical realism, identifies three different layers of reality: the empirical, the actual and the real. The *empirical* includes facts which we can perceive through the sense and/or through data gathering instruments. When sociolinguists talk about empirical evidence, for example, they refer to data usually gathered from surveys, interviews, field notes, and statistical data about populations. The *actual* includes all the facts which do exist, as opposed to all the possible facts which could have existed but did not. These facts exist whether or not we are aware of them or able to perceive them empirically (e.g., a tree falling on the other side of the planet). Finally, the *real* contains all the elements within the intransitive layer of reality. It is the realm where we can also locate causality and underlying generative mechanisms, which are central components of critical realist research. The real includes the more abstract, conceptually

dependent elements of society, for example, which have causal effects on people in context even if they cannot be perceived or measured empirically by any human agent. For example, while it is impossible for us to perceive a social class empirically as a tangible object, we know that social class division is a real phenomenon because we can see its effects on people's lives in context. Bhaskar's distinction between the empirical, the actual, and the real therefore asks researchers to understand social class division by moving beyond empirical knowledge to conceptualize it as an underlying causal mechanism. Sealey and Carter (2004) argue that Bhaskar's empirical-actual-real distinction is necessary in applied linguistics because, unlike empiricist perspectives, it successfully captures the world as an open system. The following table shows how underlying causal mechanisms, social events and human experiences are understood from the social ontology proposed by Bhaskar.

Table 1 – Bhaskar's ontological domains (Bhaskar, 2008: 46)

	The Real	The Actual	The Empirical
Mechanisms	√		
Events	√	√	
Experiences	√	√	√

As Elder-Vass (2010: 44) points out, "Bhaskar clearly intends the domain of the empirical to be a subset of the domain of the actual, which in turn is a subset of the domain of the real." Stated differently, the empirical, the actual and the real are all "real". Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate them for the purpose of scientific analysis, so that we do not succumb to the empiricist trap, and that we can secure a stronger conceptual position from which to formulate causal claims.

The transitive/intransitive distinction in philosophy also helps us understand these layers as different from each other. The objects and phenomena which populate our world (i.e., ontology) exist and unfold somewhat beyond our capacity and will to understand them, and so we can conceptualize them as part of the intransitive dimension. Conversely, our attempts at understanding the world (i. e., epistemology) are constantly evolving, and our everyday experiences, including our situated language uses, are also constantly changing and somewhat unpredictable, and so they are part of the transitive dimension. As such, we can understand Bhaskar's empirical-actual-real distinction as somewhat parallel to the intransitive-transitive distinction. Although the empirical, the actual and the real can potentially be understood as nested layers of reality, it is crucial to state that they are not simply different scales of the same thing. Quite the opposite: the empirical, the actual and the real are distinct from each other in the sense

that they include phenomena which possess distinct and emergent properties and powers, making them irreducible to each other. Moreover, it is also important not to place a specific social phenomenon exclusively within one dimension. For example, while situated language use can safely be located within the transitive dimension, language is also a system of semiotic signs and rules which exist also beyond people's communicative activities (e.g., in grammar books and dictionaries) (Bouchard, 2018). Similarly, other elements core to people's lived experiences (e.g., ideas, beliefs, identities, ideologies) also occupy a place within both the transitive and intransitive dimensions, as both antecedent cultural resources and part of people's situated subjectivities. In short, all phenomena of interest to social scientists are layered – i.e., constituted of distinct and emergent parts, each with their distinct and emergent properties and powers – and so the task of social scientists is to account for how these different layers interact causally to produce the phenomena under scrutiny.

Equipped with this layered, anti-empiricist view of reality, critical realism specifically aims to regulate the formulation of causal or explanatory statements by specifying the properties and powers of the constituting parts of reality prior to analysis of their causal interplay (Archer, 1998). For example, critical realism considers language, discourse and power as layered or stratified social phenomena possessing both transitive and intransitive properties (e.g., language being a situated practice and an antecedent, enduring, enabling and constraining cultural resource) interacting with other stratified phenomena, as people attempt to complete projects and fulfill goals (e.g., learning a language, protecting and promoting a language variety) within a pre-existing, stratified and contingent social realm. By recognizing the transitive, languaged/cultured domain of human activity including communication and the scientific production of knowledge, critical realism does not constitute a throwback to positivism. Instead, it underlines the importance of a dialectical approach to understanding the relationship between (a) the transitive and intransitive layers (i.e., reality and people's constantly evolving expressions and understandings of that reality), and (b) structure, culture and agency.

Critical realism is, in other words, a *relational* ontology, although one which considers causal relationships between social phenomena as possible precisely because they unfold between distinct and emergent phenomena. This specific point is often missed by interpretivists who, as part of their problematic approaches to causality, tend to overemphasize relationships between things, often to the point of fusing things into one and the same complex entity. Giddens's (1979) notion of agency and structure being "two sides of the same coin" exemplifies this tendency. This particular conflation – what Archer (1995) calls a *central* conflation – is also prominent in empiricism, although it is more specifically a product of relationism, a conceptual viewpoint which

argues that objects and phenomena cannot be understood outside of their relationships with other phenomena. *Contra* the interpretivist critique, Coole (2002: 122) strengthens the realist viewpoint by arguing that "dialectical thinkers never do posit binary oppositions as such and certainly not in any metaphysical or ontological way. If oppositions are recognised, these are always in a dialectical process of reciprocity that is highly dynamic, unstable and productive of the opposing terms themselves". Counter relationism, critical realism is a relational ontology which, again, offers a robust conceptual basis upon which to analyze causality and, if we extend this to the realm of sociolinguistics, formulate a critique of different forms of linguistic and social inequalities including linguistic hierarchies and unequal access to the acquisition of legitimate language(s). Critical realism's layered viewpoint is possible within a scientific project characterized not by pure and unmediated objectivity, but rather by a commitment to objective knowledge, a notion which I discuss further below.

Critical realism is often confused with new materialism, a vision antagonistic to any form of relativism, and as a "renewed positivism" which professes direct and unmediated access to reality (e.g., Parker, 1998; Nikander, 2008), or a "way" towards an infallible form of knowledge. These interpretations overlook fundamental differences between critical realism and naïve realism (or naïve objectivism) which, unlike critical realism, fails to appreciate the subjective status of human perception and understanding. This basic misunderstanding is likely the product of confusion between scientific realism and literary Realism which, as I have stated above, are incompatible perspectives. Critical realism instead offers a depth ontology which both acknowledges people's perceptual and computational limitations and holds on to the possibility of objective knowledge. In sum, the mistaken view that critical realism constitutes a form of foundationalism claiming privileged access to objective truth fails to consider one of the core principles of critical realism, which is that reality exists and unfolds independently of anyone's capacity or attempts to understand it.

By *depth ontology*, critical realist thinkers and scholars extend the empirical-actual-real distinction to argue that society and social phenomena (including people) are structured into different layers or strata containing elements of ontologically different kinds, although profoundly linked to each other (Layder, 2006). For example, in Bouchard (2021) I describe language development not as a mental process taking place within the minds of individual learners exclusively, but as a complex and layered process necessitating a complex interaction between biological, cognitive, emotional, reflexive, pedagogical, critical and social processes. Each of these layers contain different elements with different properties and powers, and with different causal effects upon each other. To understand language development, we therefore need to account for

processes located within and across these different layers so as to understand their causal interaction.

Critical realism's layered or stratified viewpoint is therefore advantageous not only when it comes to revealing the complexity of research variables – for example, learner motivation as involving biological, neurological, reflexive, interactional and social processes – but more importantly when attempting to understand complex causal mechanisms leading to the emergence of empirically accessible phenomena. Critical realism's relational viewpoint and depth ontology, in this sense, ask researchers to understand both the ontological differences and the complex causal interplay between distinct and layered elements within a research project, within context and over time.

When critical realists talk about uncovering the properties and powers of social objects, phenomena and processes under investigation, they are specifically focused on causal potentials, specifically the capacity for people, things, ideas, or processes to cause or influence, and to be caused or influenced by, other things. For example, people can be conceptualized as possessing agentive properties and powers to do and say things in the real world, to reproduce and/or resist cultural resources, ideologies, social structures, systems of oppression and so forth. At times they can be emotional and irrational, and operate at both conscious and subconscious levels. Ideologies, on the other hand, are no such things. Instead, they can be conceptualized as constraining and enabling influences found within the Cultural System (Archer, 2004), which means that although they do not possess agentive powers like people do, their causal effects can be activated through people's agentive involvement.

The critical realist principles summarized thus far might appear somewhat common-sensical to most readers. However, ample evidence found in applied linguistic literature – including the examples provided by Kramsch, Norton and Heller discussed earlier, and a large portion of quantitative studies guided by successionism – show that this type of ontological discernment is often bifurcated by scholars, leading to rather conflationary statements about causal relationships between research variables. As we saw earlier, this was particularly the case with Norton's (2000) study of immigrant women in Canada, in which the author's analysis failed at an ontological level because direct links were drawn between participants' stated views and broader cultural and structural forces said to affect their lived experiences.

We also saw earlier that while interpretivist sociolinguistics holds an ambivalent stance towards causality, the successionist strand of applied linguistics is rather agnostic towards causality, instead largely preferring to reveal constant conjunctions within and across sets of statistical values as possible indications of causal relationships. As such, what are often missing in

successionist applied linguistics research are causal models cognizant of the properties and powers of research variables and participants, models which argue beyond the reality of statistical relationships. The interpretivist strand of applied linguistics, however, largely rejects the notion of causality as a remnant of modernism, instead preferring the view of social processes and phenomena as discursively constructed through discourse. This refusal is formulated explicitly in Kramsch's (2012) portrayal of applied linguistics as an *epistemic stance*.

In sharp contrast, critical realism is committed to uncovering objective knowledge and causal relationships, and the following core tenets (hereby formulated within the context of sociolinguistic research) provide philosophical grounds for this commitment:

(1) Reality exists somewhat independently from people's understandings of it.
(2) Human understandings are profoundly conditioned by the structure of objective reality, which means that (a) they are not pure, unrestrained discursive creations, and (b) people's languaged/cultured viewpoints nevertheless allow them to gain reliable insight into objective reality (including the reality of linguistic inequality/oppression as system). The reality of scientific progress underscores this transitive-intransitive relationship.
(3) Sociolinguists should therefore be relative about knowledge, although not about objective reality. Again, science and scientific progress are possible precisely because the transitive and intransitive dimensions are different (i.e., because scientists are able to recognize the presence of an ontological realm distinct from their understandings of it) (Bhaskar, 1998b). Without this awareness, scientific progress would be impossible.
(4) The focus for sociolinguistics is consequently ontological rather than epistemological (perhaps the most important difference between critical realism and interpretivism). This allows sociolinguists to produce scientific knowledge not relative to the group that produces it, but rather knowledge subjected to criticism from multiple directions and research traditions (thus avoiding poststructuralism's incommensurability dilemma).
(5) The core ontological question guiding critical realist inquiries is *What are the characteristics of reality which lead people/scientists to formulate the kinds of understanding they have of it?*
(6) This question leads to a broad range of interrogations about (a) the nature of science, knowledge, discourse as layered/stratified phenomena, and (b) the ethical nature of science, including sociolinguistics.
(7) Social constructions (e.g., language, discourse, ideology, linguistic and social oppression) are layered or ontologically stratified, possessing both transitive and intransitive

properties, while profoundly related to objective, material realities. The intransitive properties of social constructions include emergent and enduring powers which, over time, allow them to become cultural/structural resources acting as constraining and enabling forces upon human agency.

(8) While humans can transform their existence and the world to some extent, these effects are most often accomplished through collective agency (i.e., although a person can adjust his/her speech patterns in context, (s)he cannot transform a language variety through individual might alone). This underscores the fact that agency is never outside society, but rather always structured/cultured.

This list of principles is clearly incomplete, and amendments to it would be required depending on the object of research. They are general enough, however, to reveal critical realism's commitment to both objective knowledge and causal explanation, the subjects of the following two sections.

Critical realism and commitment to objective knowledge

Critical realism's commitment to objective knowledge – again, the element which distinguishes critical realism from interpretivism and other forms of relativism – borrows from the above principles and can be summarized thusly:

(1) No scientist has pure, unmediated access to truth, or the state of the world beyond people's capacity and desire to understand it (the intransitive layer of reality).
(2) The social and natural sciences must therefore be social constructions (the transitive layer of reality).
(3) Although science is a social construction, it is inherently about the development of humans' understandings of objective reality.
(4) Scientific knowledge, formulated through language and refined through critical selection, emerges from situated experiences over time to gain distinct powers and properties (Popper, 1972), thus penetrating the intransitive dimension.
(5) Scientific progress is therefore possible through criticality, itself characterized by commitment to objective knowledge.

In other words, because the claims, theories and critiques advanced by scientists are crucially constrained by the very nature of the objects and phenomena they try to elucidate, they cannot be

exclusively discursive exercises or fabrications (as interpretivists and poststructuralists generally argue). It is precisely because science is a profoundly critical endeavor requiring scientists to judge how theories successfully account for observed phenomena that scientists are able to distinguish good theories from bad ones. The central critical realist question *What are the distinct properties and powers of observed phenomena and underlying generative mechanisms which lead us to the observations and conclusions we formulate about them?* allows scientists to avoid both the empiricist and relativist traps by focusing on the complex causal interaction between the transitive and intransitive layers of reality.

As a social construction, science is not neutral but rather profoundly critical. The ongoing refinement of existing scientific theories is a critical task involving scientists arguing against and even attacking each other's works (Edgley, 1998). The resilience of a particular theory over time is therefore possible when a large proportion of scientists within a field agree that this theory is most effective in accounting for the empirical phenomenon and causal relationships it aims to explain. This consensus, however, is always tentative and contingent upon new evidence and new ideas. Recognition of this necessary critical engagement characterizes critical realism's commitment to objective knowledge. Elder-Vass (2012: 131) captures this commitment, yet from a different angle, thusly: "while our perceptions of the external world are influenced by our concepts, this is a two-way process in which we develop concepts that are "good to think with" because they tend to produce reliable ways of intervening in the world." In sum, critical realism's commitment to objective knowledge comes from acknowledgment that there is a fundamental difference between the world and people's ability to perceive and understand it (either through statistical data or recorded statements), and that this difference prompts scientists to seek out increasingly more sophisticated knowledge of reality through conceptual and critical engagement, despite their limited perceptual, linguistic and computational capacities.

Being critical, science is also an ethical pursuit because it usually stems from people (scientists, practitioners, policy makers, laypersons, etc.) noticing that a phenomenon or process in the world might be contradictory, insufficient, problematic or morally wrong, and that knowledge of it can potentially contribute to human emancipation. Social critique, in this sense, is not a mere discursive exercise in the interpretivist sense, but rather a human practice marked by commitment to objective knowledge and the identification of different forms of social oppression and inequality as systems. Critical realism is thus also critical by (a) acknowledging that the social world is unfair to many, (b) conceptualizing different forms of oppression as systems with intransitive properties beyond situated interaction (thus avoiding the empiricist trap), and (c) recognizing the crucial capacity of human agents to engage in individual and collective efforts to

deconstruct and improve society and its structures through sustained critical effort and commitment to objective knowledge, social justice and social equality. However, critical realism does not succumb to the neoliberalist delusion that people are capable of "being whatever they want to be, any time they want", by recognizing that agents' critical efforts are also structured and cultured phenomena.

Critical realism is therefore anti-relativist in the sense that it does not limit its scope to the empirical layer, or to human perception or ability to produce and consume discourse, nor does it reduce social inequality or the social world in general to mere discursive products. Instead, it conceptualizes the social world as laminated (or layered or stratified) and open, which leads to the related assumption that the ways in which objects of scientific inquiry are structured necessarily restricts how they can be understood (Archer, 1998). Sayer (2000: 71) provides a succinct summary of critical realism's commitment to objective knowledge in the following way: "(1) There is no neutral access to the world, knowledge is linguistic (by and large) and social, and language is not a transparent, stable medium, but opaque and slippery. (2) We can nevertheless develop reliable knowledge of the world and have scientific progress."

This brings us to the final point in this section on objective knowledge, which is that critical realism, unlike interpretivism and other forms of relativism, assigns a rather different role and importance to beliefs, because it accepts that scientists need to hold beliefs about how a phenomenon *is* and how it *ought to be* in order to guide their critical and scientific endeavors. However, precisely because these beliefs are important elements in research projects, they must also be subjected to the same critical scrutiny as any other research variable or element. Consequently, scientists need a process by which they can critically evaluate their beliefs against an objective reality which, again, they can perceive albeit through fallible means. This process combines reflexivity, scientific critique, and commitment to objective knowledge.

Critical realism and causal explanations

We saw earlier in this paper that successionism tends to be agnostic towards causality because it prioritizes the search for statistical patterns between research variables, and when causal claims are made by successionist social scientists, they are usually presented as statistical conjunctions rather than framed within robust causal models which argue beyond statistical evidence. We also saw that interpretivism is even more radical in that it sees talks about causality as extraneous and/or suspicious remnants of a defunct positivist past. This last viewpoint is voiced by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) who define causality as an echo of the

Enlightenment and the product of a logic of determinism. It is important to note, however, that as complexity theorists Larsen-Freeman and Cameron are more closely aligned with realism than interpretivism. Moreover, the object of their critique – which the authors unfortunately do not make explicit – is not the notion of causality in its entirety but rather one particular version of it, namely the deductive-nomological model. This model explains cause-effect relationships in linear terms, thus as relatively predictable (hence Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's critique), and from which scientists sometimes postulate the existence of causal laws.

What is therefore missing from Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's statement is acknowledgment of the central importance of causality in scientific endeavors, enriched by a wider view of causality beyond the deductive-nomological model. Essentially, critical realists are in agreement with Larsen-Freeman and Cameron's critique, although they carefully distinguish between different approaches to causality. More importantly, although critical realists reject the deductive-nomological model, they do not revert to a relativist stance, as Larsen-Freeman and Cameron unfortunately seem to do at different points in their argumentation. In his realist critique of relativism and its overemphasis on discourse, for example, Porpora (1987: 49) explains that "a science cannot be entirely made up of logical propositions. A science should specify causal connections among events in addition to whatever logical connections it advances. If a science does not do this, it is not going to lead anywhere very interesting."

The central point to remember here is that causality remains a principal target in critical realist sociolinguistics. Even if sociolinguists can clearly establish empirically that the relationship between language, people and society is complex, radically open, non-linear and time-dependent (what Larsen-Freeman and Cameron and other CDST scholars would rightfully argue), this relationship remains fundamentally causal because changes in one complex element or variable lead to change in others. From a philosophical angle, Groff (2008: 4) explains that the critical realist view of causality "also precludes relativism about knowledge – for if the world is not all possible ways, then all competing claims about it cannot be equally sound." As such, a focus on complexity – a necessary strategy in my opinion – should not exempt scientists from considering causality as a prime target. On this point, Sayer (2000: 73) explains that this central element in scientific work should not be problematic for scientists:

> To say that A was caused by B, not C, is not to claim some kind of ultimate truth; like any other such claim it is open to revision, but that doesn't mean that we can remain agnostic about causal priority. Our survival depends on identifying it – not 'ultimately', but well enough to be able to meet our needs.

Collier (2011: 7) reminds us that causality is a central element in all scientific fields: "since social causes will co-determine the course of events with natural causes, social sciences must be causal in the same sense as natural sciences are." With its commitment to causal explanation, critical realism therefore offers a profoundly diverging view of causality than that which is offered by either successionism or interpretivism. It is, as Gerrits and Verweij (2013: 171) put it, a broader ontological perspective which "favours the language of causality to describe the world, even though it accepts that any analysis of causality is partial at best."

Critical realism, as was mentioned earlier, goes against a Humean view by conceptualizing causality not as a mere statistical relationship between events, but rather as a set of complex relationships between causal mechanisms and the causal potentials of social phenomena. The causal powers of people, phenomena, structure, culture and underlying mechanisms, in this sense, are not mere concepts but rather part of their distinct and emergent properties, thus as part of their structure, and as the sources of real effects in the real world. Even if not empirically accessible, these causal structures must nevertheless be accounted for.

In addition, the critical realist view stipulates that causality unfolds not only because of the existence of mechanisms but also because of their absence. Collier (2011) identifies negative facts, or the absence of objects or processes, as causally efficacious. For example, humans' periodic denial of objective realities, or their decision not to act, can have causal effects in context. Critical realism also sees ideas, ideologies, discourses, and other phenomena generally perceived by interpretivists and poststructuralists as transient and ephemeral discursive entities, as potential mechanisms themselves and therefore as causally efficacious. We only have to think of the considerable influence of beliefs, ideas and ideologies on how people choose to communicate and act in the real world. From a critical realist standpoint, mechanisms and their absence – just as with beliefs and ideologies – are therefore not merely transient or ephemeral phenomena, but rather "facts" of social life, with real effects on real people in real contexts. And just as with any other underlying generative mechanisms, their causal powers may or may not be activated, depending on how the structure-culture-agency interaction unfolds in context.

This view of causality is based on recognition that "causal relations are relations of natural or metaphysical necessity, rather than of contingent sequence" (Groff, 2008: 2). The critical realist view of causality also attempts to explain "non-law-like" manifestations in the social realm as the outcome of society being an open system on the one hand, and social phenomena (including people as powerful particulars) possessing distinct and emergent properties on the other. Kaidesoja (2013: 106) echoes Groff's argument thusly: "the natural necessity that connects causes to their effects in causal relations is [...] a real feature of the world, not a feature that the mind or human

understanding has somehow imposed or projected onto reality, as Kantians might argue", or as interpretivists would argue. Elder-Vass (2010: 50) explains how a stratified view of social phenomena facilitates the development of causal statements thusly:

> Any given higher-level entity, then, can be seen as a pyramid of successively lower-level parts and the causal impact of the higher-level entity as a whole includes the causal impacts of those parts. At each level, the entities formed from the lower-level parts have causal powers in their own right by virtue of how those parts are organised. The total causal impact of a higher-level entity conceived of in these laminated terms, then, includes the impact of all its lower-level parts as well as the causal powers that are emergent at its highest level.

The layered viewpoint offered by Elder-Vass is also an integral aspect of CDST, notably developed by Larsen-Freeman and Cameron in the context of applied linguistic research.

Critical realism, however, is less clear with regards to human agency as the central causal force in society. Closely aligned with critical realism, yet offering a much more explicit and insightful account of human agency, is *social* realism, particularly through the extensive work on human reflexivity by Margaret Archer. Donati and Archer (2015: 17) explain the social realist view of causality as "an explanatory framework for the transformation of social and cultural structures as a process that is continuously mediated by human agency, with agents themselves becoming transformed in the course of social transformation." Within this perspective, social structures are not presented necessarily as the original or sole causal forces, but rather as the material conditions for social actions (Lewis, 2000) – i.e., as providing resources and often the motivations for social change and/or stability. An example from the context of education helps clarify this important point. Although we cannot conceptualize schools and educational programs as causing learning to take place, we can conceptualize learners, as agents, learning as a result of their interaction with the resources and constraining/enabling influences afforded by schools and educational programs. Structure or culture are thus not causal forces in the sense that they "make things happen" in society: they are causal in the sense that their constraining and enabling potentials are triggered by agentive involvement, and from then on, they have particular effects on people's discourses, decisions and actions in context and over time.

Finally, central to the critical realist, anti-empiricist view of causality is that empirical data analysis alone is insufficient to the formulation of causal claims. As indicated earlier, causality is located at the level of the real, and so scientists do not have the privilege of observing causality

directly and/or empirically, only its effects or results. Their explanations of causality must therefore be conceptual, as scientists must develop causal claims by first formulating and combining empirically-testable theories and concepts, then by testing them against empirical evidence, and finally by refining them if theories fail to successfully account for the evidence. This highlights not only science's dependence on empirical evidence but also its profoundly conceptual – and again critical – nature. It also presents scientific endeavors as principally qualitative and interpretive human practices.

Critical realism and sociolinguistic research

Central to critical realist sociolinguistics is the conceptualization of research elements including language, discourse, context, people, power, identities and ideologies as object of scientific inquiry, thus as possessing objective properties, or again as occupying a position somewhat outside situated interaction and the research project. With the prominence of interpretivism and related empiricism in the field, however, the establishment of sociolinguistic research as a scientific project is certainly not widely agreed upon. For example, the prominent scholar Shohamy (2006) advocates a clear-cut separation between linguistics and science, and argues that the conceptualization of linguistics as a scientific discipline leads to unnecessarily closed boundaries between objects of research. As we saw earlier in this paper, Kramsch (2015) sees sociolinguistics essentially as an epistemic stance, which by extension leads her to define linguistics not as "an abstract science that studies linguistic systems like theoretical linguistics or social/functional systems which speakers and writers merely enact through speech in context. Rather, its object of study is the living process through which living, embodied speakers shape contexts through their grammars and are, in turn, shaped by them" (p. 455–456).

The problem, of course, is that, although Kramsch identifies speakers and contexts as sharing some sort of causal relationship, her anti-scientific stance does not allow her to conceptualize either in terms of their distinct and emergent properties and powers. Rather, she is only capable of reducing them to their relationship, hence relationism. Other prominent sociolinguists including García et al. (2017) offer parallel arguments to that of Kramsch, while both Shohamy (2006) and Pennycook (2013) echo this anti-scientific stance by criticizing the categorizing of languages within essentialized and territorialized boundaries as products of modernist thought. Although the latter argument does have some value, it is also important to remind ourselves that languages like Spanish, Japanese or Swahili – even if not neatly contained within specific territories – nevertheless constitute different linguistic systems, thus different aspects of the Cultural System,

and can also reasonably be positioned within specific territories. After all, it is clear that the Japanese language, for example, is mostly spoken in Japan rather than in Argentina, and that it is structured by different lexical and syntactic elements than those found in Spanish. In short, although the essentialization and territorialization of both language and culture are certainly parts of a modernist heritage worth moving beyond, realization of this should not forbid us from the very important scientific task of conceptualizing our objects of inquiry in terms of their distinct and emergent properties and powers.

Sociolinguists' notable ambivalence towards science, and towards language as an object of scientific inquiry, borrows rather directly from Bourdieu who, it must be said, provided rather powerful critiques of the relationship between facts and values, the limits of science, and the notion of truth (Grenfell, 2011). As an accomplished sociologist with a marked interest in language, Bourdieu did not see linguistics as a science, and was particularly critical of theoretical linguists' attempts to reify language through the objectification of language as a system of rules and patterns. In Bouchard (2021: 161), I note that Bourdieu rejected the notion of grammaticality,

> instead describing the processes of symbolic power and the legitimization of specific language outputs over others based on realities beyond the situated language act. He also [understood] the meaning-making process not as static or arbitrary, as in the Saussurean sense, but rather as an emergent process unfolding within specific and uniquely structured social spaces or fields, with their specific sets of habitus and resources. Bourdieu therefore [rejected] mentalist or cognitivist accounts of language and language-related phenomena.

The prioritization of language praxis – and the resulting rejection of the intransitive properties of language and discourse (i.e., the notion that language and discourse also exist beyond situated linguistic practice) – by Bourdieu and like-minded sociolinguists is both conceptually and methodologically limiting, for "without recognition of the emergent, antecedent and relatively enduring properties and powers of language as a cultural resource, i.e., as distinct from practice" (Bouchard, 2021: 161), scholars can only reach the unsatisfactory conclusion that it is possible for people to produce and understand intelligible messages *ex nihilo* (i.e., out of nothing, without reference to a pre-existing system of meaningful signs). Instead of rejecting the intransitive properties of language and discourse, we need a layered understanding of language as possessing both transitive and intransitive properties, and conceptualize the meaning-making process as possible only if people share (at least to some degree) a system of semiotic elements (including

linguistic forms) as an emergent, pre-existing cultural resource distinct from situated language use which both constrains and enables situated interaction. It is, in retrospect, very odd for Bourdieu to talk about *habitus*, *doxa* and *field* as intransitive (i.e., antecedent and enduring) structuring social structures on the one hand, and reject the intransitive properties of language on the other. This contradiction, however, seems to be unnoticed by interpretivist sociolinguists aligned with a Bourdieusian viewpoint.

Fortunately, interpretivism does not characterize all of sociolinguistics, and we can certainly find studies in the field which explicitly or implicitly adopt layered ontologies similar to that of critical realism. Certain aspects of the highly influential edited volume by Coupland, Sarangi and Candlin (2001), and the classic study of teenage speech in an urban school by Rampton (2006), for example, offer ontologically stratified viewpoints, while demonstrating commitment to interdisciplinarity. Agha (2007) also unpacks the complex process of human interaction in similarly layered fashion.

To understand, and distinguish between, the intransitive and transitive properties of both language and discourse, Bhaskar (1998c: 216) explains that

> the rules of grammar, like natural structures, impose limits on the speech acts we can perform, but they do not determine our performances. This conception thus preserves the status of human agency, while doing away with the myth of creation (logical or historical), which depends upon the possibility of an individualist reduction. And in so doing it allows us to see that necessity in social life operates in the last instance via the intentional activity of agents.

By extension, other sociolinguistic variables such as identity, gender, social class, ideology, power, etc. should also be conceptualized within critical realist sociolinguistics as possessing both transitive and intransitive properties, which means that they occupy a place both within and beyond situated interaction. The principal task of sociolinguists then becomes clarifying how phenomena within and across these two layers or dimensions interact causally.

Critical realist sociolinguistics also requires commitment to identifying relatively enduring causal mechanisms leading to the emergence of empirically observable linguistic realities (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998). As we saw earlier, the development of causal explanation (i.e., *Why is my data this way and not another way?*) is a tentative and fallible process of discovering causality through empirically informed conceptualization. Critical realist sociolinguistics therefore aims to understand sociolinguistic phenomena in causal terms – meaning, as outcomes of the complex,

dynamic, open and non-linear relationship between structure, culture and agency as distinct and emergent layers of the social realm. It is thus crucial for sociolinguists to be equipped with concepts related to these three layers, for as Vandenberghe (2014: 30-1) cogently argues, "without a solid concept of structure and social systems, social theory becomes idealistic and loses its critical edge [...] without an adequate conception of culture and symbolism, it becomes mechanistic and deterministic [...] without a convincing theory of practices, social and cultural structures are reified into anonymous processes without subjects".

Preferring the language of causality, critical realist sociolinguistics should also aim to provide causal statements regarding the complex interaction between language and society within and across contexts, rather than merely document or describe diverse linguistic phenomena within specific localities, as is most prevalent in current interpretivist sociolinguistics. Moreover, variables in critical realist sociolinguistics (e.g., people, standard and local language varieties, language ideologies, language policy and planning, ethnicity, social class, genders, generations, social inequalities, the media) should be conceptualized as possessing distinct and emergent properties and powers, including the potential to be causally efficacious. These causal powers, however, may or may not be exercised, depending on the mechanisms involved and how they intersect in specific contexts and times (Bhaskar and Lawson, 1998).

Viewing language as stratified phenomenon rather than exclusively as a situated performance (Bouchard, 2018) also allows sociolinguists to explain how, in situated interaction, people reproduce linguistic structures/patterns (from standard and/or local varieties) without necessarily realizing it. For example, when a Japanese learner of English says "I have *arubaito* now" to mean "I have to go to my part-time job now", she might not be fully aware that she is drawing from (and by extension reproducing) three different linguistic systems – Standard German, Standard English and contemporary Japanese. In other words, critical realist sociolinguistics views situated language use not as the product of a purely rational engagement by people with the world, but also as layered, complex and quite often habitual. This means that situated language use cannot be fully revealed through the mere documentation of empirically-accessible speech behaviors, nor through expressed beliefs gathered through interviews and surveys. Bhaskar (1998c) explains how the social activities of agents (including their language behaviors) unfold in layered fashion, within and across multiple dimensions of social life:

> People, in their conscious activity, for the most part unconsciously reproduce (and occasionally transform) the structures governing their substantive activities of production. Thus people do not marry to reproduce the nuclear family or work to sustain

> the capitalist economy. Yet it is nevertheless the unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is also a necessary condition for, their activity. Moreover, when social forms change, the explanation will not normally lie in the desires of agents to change them that way, though as a very important theoretical and political limit it may do so (pp. 215–216).

A layered view of situated language use also implies that ideologies cannot be simply read off from the data (Bouchard, 2017; Fairclough, 2010). For one, localized patterns of language use do not automatically explain agentive identification (or lack thereof) with particular ideologies or cultural resources prevalent within specific linguistic communities. Also, these patterns might not constitute direct evidence of awareness by community members of the agency-structure-culture interaction (the main problem in Norton's 2000 study). In short, the layered viewpoint possible within critical realist sociolinguistics implies that analysis of empirical data must be grounded in recognition for the consequential causal role of underlying causal mechanisms which, again, are not empirical entities.

Based on the above principles, critical realist sociolinguists interested in the issues of language shift and linguistic inequalities, for example, should ask questions such as:

(1) What underlying mechanisms lead to the marginalization of language-minoritized communities around the world? What characteristics, properties and powers do these mechanisms possess?
(2) Are there underlying mechanisms operating across context and across time periods? If so, why these mechanisms and not others?
(3) What empirical evidence suggests the presence of these mechanisms, and how?
(4) Why are these language-minoritized communities marginalized in these particular ways and not other ways?
(5) What salient linguistic and cultural behaviors help reveal the dominant and marginal communicative strategies employed by people in these particular cultural/linguistic communities? Why are these behaviors specifically identified as salient?
(6) To what extent do people in this particular cultural community reveal awareness of the broader cultural and structural realities – including underlying generative mechanisms – conditioning their linguistic/cultural behaviors?
(7) To what extent has the research project itself helped members of linguistic/cultural communities notice the existence and influence of broader cultural and structural

realities?

(8) Based on answers to the preceding questions, to what extent can linguistic/cultural reproduction and/or transformation be said to take place in these communities? To what extent do these processes relate to existing structures of linguistic oppression and their experiences by people in context?

(9) In the communities under scrutiny, what viable critical and emancipatory strategies can reasonably be deployed by community members to overcome linguistic inequalities and other forms of social oppression (provided that these can be detected)?

Critical realist sociolinguistics thus begins with conceptual work – the identification of possible mechanisms and potential causal relationships – followed by a focus on empirical data to test the merits of this conceptual work, followed by adjustments, recalibrations and enrichment of theories, followed by a movement back to empirical data analysis to make sure theory has not truncated or over-simplified the complexity found in the body of data, and then back to theory to conclude and hopefully bring further sophistication to existing knowledges. This movement back and forth between empirical data analysis and conceptual work in critical realist sociolinguistics also requires sustained observation and critical comparisons between people's actions, discourses, and texts, to account for how the complex and layered realities under focus interact with each other and change (or stay the same) over time.

The critical potential of critical realist sociolinguistics, as mentioned earlier, also comes from realization that people's emancipatory efforts do not exist or unfold "outside" structure or culture; rather, they are profoundly constrained and enabled by these. Critical potential is also informed by recognition that beliefs, values and the likes are not mere transitive entities, nor are they situated exclusively in the minds of individuals: they also possess some degree of objectivity, given their emergent properties and powers beyond situated interaction to influence people's discourse and actions on the ground. In other words, values, beliefs and ideologies also exist intransitively, thus somewhat independently from anyone's capacity to understand them and/or adhere to them (Ash, 2022). This creates the possibility for people, as part of their engagement with the world and their commitment to objective knowledge, to evaluate the merits, legitimacy and logical consistency of values, beliefs and ideologies in relation to their projects and aspirations, as well as against an objective reality existing somewhat independently from anyone's capacity to understand it. A related point is developed in the section on universalism below.

There are, of course, clear methodological implications to underline. For one, researchers need to do more than rely on policy texts or survey and interview statements, and read off

ideologies and subject positions from the data. They also need to engage in sustained ethnographically-informed observation of people's situated discourse and actions rather than rely on one-off data gathering strategies. They also need to look at points of convergence and divergence in their data (e. g., differences and similarities between statistical evidence and between what people say and do) and attempt to explain them as products of the complex and ongoing structure-culture-agency relationship. These methodological requirements necessarily involve critical deliberation regarding the distinct and emergent properties and powers of people who populate sociolinguistic studies as well as the data which results from such investigations, because what sociolinguists are looking at are, by their very nature, distinct, complex, opaque, layered, and often causally efficacious realities unfolding and shifting over time.

Universalism in critical sociolinguistics

This closing section extends the above argument regarding sociolinguists' necessary commitment to objective knowledge to underline the importance of a universalist perspective to both sociolinguistics and social critique. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this argument in support of universalism is necessary now, given that (a) critique is possible if grounded in a vision of a world which has yet to materialize (a defining feature of universalism as a *value*, and (b) in the current context of culture wars in the media and on college campuses universalism is under constant and ill-justified attack from both the far right and far left.

Universalism, it must be said, has roots in positivism, and is often associated with the problematic Western (and colonialist, although not necessarily so) heritage of traditional sociolinguistics, and the presence of enduring ideological agendas in the field (Bouchard, 2022). In this sense, interpretivist sociolinguists are justified in their critiques of these enduring positivist tendencies which, for example, come in the form of prescriptivism (e.g., the promulgation of rigid structures of and approaches to language use), the denigration of local varieties as "inferior" to standard varieties, and the resilience of the raciolinguistic native speaker criterion (Bouchard, 2020).

That being said, the opposites of universalism – communautarism and wokism as its more radical version – offer even more problematic conceptual grounds for critical sociolinguistics. My argument echoes Brumfit's (1997: 92) point that "any concern to redress linguistic inequalities demands some sense of universalities, for the very concept "inequality" makes claims about an indivisible concept "equality"". It also echoes both Harding's (1993: 236) point that "in order to achieve the status of knowledge, beliefs are supposed to break free of – to transcend – their

original ties to local, historical interests, values and agendas", and Lawson's (1999: 39) view that "there is no getting away from generalities. Claims that everywhere there are differences, or that differences matter, or that knowledge is situated, partial and so forth, are no less general". In other words, because sociolinguistics is, as I have argued so far, itself a scientific project characterized by commitment to objective knowledge, its critical investment also requires commitment to universalist principles. Arguments drawn from the feminist works of Lawson (1999) and Heinich (2021) help structure the following argument.

To understand universalism, it is helpful to first consider its opposite – communitarianism – a viewpoint now dominant on college campuses around the world which, although presenting itself as a celebration of diversity and pluralism, constitutes in practice a form of absolutism (Heinich, 2021). Communitarianism begins by reducing people to social categories based on language, culture, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age and so forth. By emphasizing differences over similarities, it divides people into increasingly granular identity categories from which it becomes difficult for them to extricate themselves. This is because communitarianism also characterizes members of specific linguistic/cultural communities as the latter's sole legitimate representatives (given relativism's incommensurability criterion). It further constrains people by labeling them as either *dominant* or *dominated* (never both or neither), and in the process, galvanizing ideological tensions between communities. A clear sign of the growing prominence of communitarianism around the world can be denoted in the proliferation of domains of knowledge labeled "studies" (e.g., queer studies, colonial studies, gender studies). Rather than encompassing these different strands within broader academic fields such as sociology, anthropology, or history, these "studies" are devoted principally to very specific issues grounded in a spirit of communitarianism, with associated philosophical and political problems.

Communitarianism poses considerable difficulties for the development of a robust and constructive social critique, for as Poster (1989: 48) argues, "if the intellectual is proscribed from theorizing the totality, consigned instead to the boundaries of local institutions, then political protest, it would appear, must also remain confined to individual issues, local affairs, interest-group pressures. General social transformation has apparently been abandoned in favor of a guerrilla warfare." In other words, tribalization becomes the main process of identity creation and expression within communitarianism. Emerging from this is an ongoing competition between increasingly divided identity groups for power and resources.

Wokism is communitarianism's more radical version. It extends (i.e., radicalizes) the above principles to make the following claims:

(1) Objective knowledge and universal principles do not exist. Rather, social reality is a social construction exclusively, and by extension, is merely a collection of perspectives. Universalism is merely a product of white male heterosexual ideology.
(2) White male heterosexuals, given their heritage as the sole dominant segment of the world's population, can no longer voice their views regarding others, especially minoritized populations.
(3) The mission of social critique is precisely to dismantle and replace the perspectives of white male heterosexuals. This quest shapes all fields of inquiry, including both the social and the natural sciences, particularly the latter's reliance on the notion of rationality.
(4) Social critique and emancipation are achieved through the cancellation of perceived dominant voices, and by reshaping language and discourse, since these provide both the context and vehicle through which society becomes real.
(5) Minoritized populations are engaged, in their own ways, in an ongoing struggle against white male heterosexual domination – the only possible target because racism, sexism and other forms of social oppression can only come from white male heterosexuals. A coalition of efforts among minoritized groups, however, is difficult because it requires a sort of "evening out" of differences and particularities, which would go against the incommensurable principle at the heart of both communitarianism and wokism.
(6) Because people act upon their beliefs, change happens at the level of belief creation and consumption. The education system therefore becomes the main site of social critique and emancipation.
(7) If social critics express doubts regarding the above principles, they merely reveal resilient subconscious biases, thus becoming obstacles to social progress and human emancipation, and must in turn be cancelled.

In sharp contrast, universalism is an ideology which prioritizes the "common good", understood here as a value located at a higher level of abstraction than diversity (the latter being an undeniable empirical phenomenon), thus of higher importance to emancipatory projects. Examples of the common good include people's right

(1) not to be discriminated against,
(2) not to suffer verbal or physical violence,
(3) to have equal access to healthcare, education and work,
(4) to receive protection from their government, and

(5) to use and access information in their first language.

Defending the common good is a core responsibility all citizens within democratic nation-states should fulfill to the best of their abilities, and many of them do so by electing representatives who, hopefully, defend their interests. To protect the common good, ideals and shared values become essential elements in this humanistic project. As Lawson (1999: 47) makes clear, "the possibility of human freedom pre-supposes the existence of shared human objectives, i.e., real interests and motives, ultimately rooted in common needs and capabilities."

There are four main criticisms targeted at universalism: divergences from empirical facts, ethnocentrism, domination and uniformization. Heinich's (2021) counterarguments for each are hereby summarized. Firstly, universalism is accused of not reflecting the complex and fluid reality people experience on the ground. Admittedly, history has shown that human beings have been conceptualized in quite different ways depending on where they come from, the color of their skin, their gender or their religious belief(s). Although this critique is more than justified, it is important to remember that universalism – as a value – does not aim to describe empirical reality; it is instead a principle grounded in critical inquiry which aims to capture how society *ought to be* – i.e., a state of affair which has yet to materialize. As such, universalism can serve as a valuable point of reference in the humanistic project of ensuring that all people, as citizens of nations, and regardless of their appearances or allegiances, enjoy access to the common good.

Secondly, universalism, as an epistemology largely developed in the West, is accused of ethnocentrism. Again, this criticism is justified, as many of the principles developed within universalism overlook differences and local particularities found in non-Western nations/communities. That being said, values which do not necessarily reflect the lives and experiences of people everywhere can still be improved rather than cancelled altogether. More importantly, since a value is a normative rather than a descriptive entity, it does not aim to reflect the sum total of all the particularities of the world. Also, a value's normative intent does not nullify its potential universal relevance. For example, Zen Buddhism is a philosophical approach largely developed in Japan, although with global appeal and relevance. Similarly, jazz music is a characteristically African-American artform, although played and enjoyed by people from all cultures who, in a wonderful feedback loop, enrich jazz music. The Covid-19 pandemic provides another valuable example of the universal potential of values. In Japan, the pre-existing mask-wearing, social distancing, and related hygienic customs greatly facilitated the management of the spread of Covid-19 throughout the country. In many other countries such as Canada or the U.S., however, health and hygiene measures were often framed as attacks on personal freedom, leading to even

more severe socio-economic complications and much higher death tolls per capita. The mask-wearing custom in Japan, in this sense, has universal relevance, even if it has roots in the Japanese context. Furthermore, and perhaps more evidently, humans everywhere clearly share common biological, cognitive, linguistic, cultural and social characteristics, which means that consideration for the similarities and bonds between all humans – and between humans, animals and the natural world for that matter – is not a Western phenomenon exclusively; rather, it necessarily transcends cultural boundaries. In short, the fact that values emerge from specific cultural contexts does not imply that they only have local relevance, that they cannot be improved upon, or that they cannot be adopted by other cultural groups. Consequently, dismissing universalism because of its Western heritage is highly reductive and, again, erroneously interprets a value as a descriptive rather than a normative entity.

Thirdly, and extending from the second critique, universalism is criticized for advocating the perspectives of the dominant over the dominated. Although ample evidence justifies this critique, the fact that a value does not aim to describe objective reality (the descriptive dimension) does not remove the possibility for a value to have relevance to all humans, regardless of their origins or allegiances (the normative dimension). A value or ideology can certainly contain problematic elements (e. g., Western, racial, bourgeois biases); in fact, they most often do. Nevertheless, problematic elements can be critically unpacked by people on the ground and in their contexts, and replaced by more sophisticated elements – especially if diverse groups of people with diverging viewpoints are able to debate productively – without canceling the guiding value altogether.

Fourthly, universalism is said to promulgate a uniformization of society. Here again, the purpose of universalism as a value is misunderstood. As a normative entity, universalism does not pretend to account for all the differences, particularities, subjectivities and lived experiences which enrich the world; rather, it operates at a higher level than diversity by aiming to ensure that regardless of one's origins, age, gender, skin color, sexual orientation, linguistic identity, etc., all humans have access to the common good. What universalism attacks, in this sense, is not diversity at all, but rather the denial and/or curtailing of citizens' rights and responsibilities on the basis of specific identity markers or affiliations.

Contra communitarianism or wokism, universalism is not blinded by particularities. Because its main purpose is to secure access to the common good regardless of differences, it works against different forms of absolutism including separatism, differentialism, identity politics, and the growing hierarchization of victimhood through tribalization, culpabilization and victimization. Again – and this cannot be stressed enough – universalism does not deny the reality of diversity,

difference and the complexity of identity work. It rejects, however, the tendency among many contemporary social critics, including many within the interpretivist strands of sociolinguistics, to reduce political and emancipatory agendas to a process of (a) dividing and reducing people to increasingly granular social categories, (b) emphasizing fixed dominant/dominated identities, and (c) instilling a hierarchy of suffering and victimhood. As a value and as a fallible human perspective, universalism appreciates the undeniable empirical evidence of diversity, but also moves beyond it by highlighting what binds people together as humans. It recognizes the terrible reality of human oppression and discrimination as a shared human experience, and conceptualizes different forms of social inequality as systems to be dismantled and replaced through collective engagement and sustained action. As with social critique and the elucidation of objective knowledge, universalism is therefore both an impossible and a necessary project which requires commitment from everyone.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explained some of the most salient elements in my recent published works in sociolinguistics, and argued that both applied linguistics and sociolinguistics require a robust social ontology to overcome some of their conceptual and methodological problems and shortcomings. I have developed this argument by (a) identifying successionism and interpretivism as the main sources of these problems, (b) outlining principles guiding critical realist sociolinguistics as a viable response to successionism and interpretivism, and (c) arguing that critical realism requires commitment to objective knowledge, causal explanation and universalism. Many of the ideas proposed were not fully developed but merely suggested, and so I invite readers to consult my published works, including the resources I cite extensively from, to gain a clearer understanding of the argumentation offered in this paper. Readers can see a list of those in the reference section which follows.

My interest as a sociolinguist has mainly centered on the interaction between language and society, how sociolinguistic research is done, and how scholars in the field arrive at specific conclusions regarding language and its real-world uses and not others. In other words, my focus has been principally aimed towards the development of a philosophy of applied linguistics. Of particular interest to me in this process has been the relationship between sociolinguistics and social theory, including notably the issues of complexity, emergence and causality. In Bouchard (2021) I unpack these issues and explain how they relate to each other in the project of improving existing applied linguistics, particularly with regards to the growing popularity of CDST in the

field. In this paper I did not discuss CDST in any depth, but in the 2021 volume I devote two substantial chapters to it because, in my view, this theory – or theoretical perspective to be more accurate – is not only closely aligned with critical realism, it also provides valuable insight into the evolution of and interaction between complex systems over time. Because of this, CDST is able to provide a trenchant critique of, and powerful conceptual and methodological alternatives to, successionism. In parallel, critical realism, as an anti-relativist emergentist ontology, successfully integrates many CDST principles, while allowing researchers to overcome the limitations of interpretivism, notably its more radical poststructuralist strand. In my 2021 book I also highlight a range of problematic and somewhat unresolved issues in CDST as it pertains to applied linguistics and the social sciences at large, and argue that its successful integration within applied linguistics requires a critical realist frame.

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