

UC Riverside

Issues in Applied Linguistics

Title

Political Applied Linguistics and Postmodernism: Towards an Engagement of Similarity within Difference

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3v9089fn>

Journal

Issues in Applied Linguistics, 1(2)

ISSN

1050-4273

Author

Kanpol, Barry

Publication Date

1990-12-30

DOI

10.5070/L412005004

Peer reviewed

EXCHANGE

Political Applied Linguistics and Postmodernism: Towards an Engagement of Similarity within Difference

A Reply to Pennycook

Barry Kanpol
Chapman College

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to avoid the increasing influence that postmodern thought has had on most fields of human practice. From art to architecture, to dance, television, philosophy, education, politics, and now applied linguistics, postmodern vocabulary and consciousness seem to be materializing into a popular as well as an intellectual discourse.

In the opening article of the inaugural number of *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, Alastair Pennycook (1990) joins this dialogue by delineating assorted meanings of postmodernism. At the outset, I want to affirm that such efforts must be applauded. I, like Pennycook, am both appalled and horrified at the increasingly decrepit conditions of our society. As an educator, I take issue with many institutionalized norms and values, in part because I believe they are among the chief antecedents to the moral and spiritual predicaments of our times (Purpel, 1989). I, like Pennycook, believe that the pedagogical must be more political and the political more pedagogical.¹ Also, like Pennycook, I view the current discourse of modernist linguistics and applied linguistics as hegemonically trapped within a modernist objectification of language.

While I have no wish to undermine Pennycook's provocative and thoughtful article in any way, I do want to react to it on a number of levels. First, I will summarize what I like and dislike about Pennycook's article. I will also attempt to reconcile the modern/postmodern dialectic by sketching out some of the strengths of modernism and using them to bridge the strengths and

weaknesses of postmodernism. I will then further the modern/postmodern debate by developing a theory of "similarity within difference" (Kanpol, forthcoming [c]). In conclusion, I will situate this theory within the context of critical pedagogy² and the political and practical ramifications it can have for the field of applied linguistics. By doing so, I intend to add to Pennycook's basic argument, which began as a robust effort to politicize applied linguistics, but which fell short in its theoretical and practical formulations to do so.

Pennycook Revisited

Pennycook describes how aspects of applied linguistics are "children of the modernist era" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 10), an era in which, Pennycook cogently argues, language is standardized and objectified and in which a "correspondence theory which assumes a one-to-one correspondence between objects, words and thoughts" exists (p. 11). This modernist condition, contends Pennycook, focuses on both the structure of language and "the individual in cognitive isolation" (p. 12), yet concurrently omits language learning as a referent for a critique of political, historical power and unequal relationships in society.

Pennycook enunciates well the drawbacks of the positivistic methods of quantification in applied linguistics, though in response to these drawbacks, Pennycook asserts that qualitative research methods³ can become part of a research agenda that situates language within what he calls a critical applied linguistics. Against the backdrop of this critique, Pennycook then posits his major thesis: that a *principled postmodernism* in applied linguistics which "retains a notion of the political and ethical" can be used to counter the hegemonic body of modernist applied linguistic knowledge (p. 17). To strengthen this counter-hegemonic stance, Pennycook cites examples of feminist and third-world critical literature that draw the reader closer to the kind of political and ethical condition Pennycook is headed towards.

After this review of more general critical theory, Pennycook's descriptions of "critical linguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnography and pedagogy" (pp. 23-35) are, taken together, a broad attempt to justify "principled postmodernism" as an emancipatory project needed to undermine the oppressive power relations both in

and out of the classroom. Finally, in his summary, Pennycook succinctly lays the foundation for what a "principled postmodernism" might look like in a discourse of critical applied linguistics.

I find two major weaknesses in Pennycook's article. First, Pennycook has failed to enunciate the positive aspects of modernism. Such an omission weakens his theoretical (and political) position for a critical applied linguistics, while a truly "principled postmodernism" might have considered some of the favorable aspects of modernism and the negative aspects of postmodernism. Second, Pennycook did not attempt to generate a practical agenda to connect with his grand theory. In the following, I respond to these two weaknesses.

The Best of Modernism Reconciled with Postmodernism

Anticipating later theoretical arguments in this paper, it will be helpful, first, to lay out the basic configurations of both modernism and postmodernism. In its best and often most radical progressive sense, modernism envisages the hope of enlightenment, a commitment to community (Habermas, 1981) through individual reason and reflection, a unity of the individual and society in an ongoing dialectical vision of individual betterment, social progress, human emancipation, and human possibility. Political modernism provides a discourse for "the possibility of developing social relations in which the principles of liberty, justice, and equality provide the basis for democratic struggle" (Giroux, 1990, p. 6). In all fairness, the utopian dreams of modernity are not unworthy and not unlike the dreams of postmodern critics. Indeed, pivotal to both modernism and postmodernism is the idea that the emancipatory possibilities of pluralism and heterogeneity become the basis for both new and struggled for meanings.

Central to the current debate on postmodernism's attack on universal reason, but with a similar "modern" quest for emancipation and liberation, is the ongoing dialogue of what counts as 'difference'.⁴ Differences, according to Giroux (1990), are "historically constructed within ideologies and material practices that connect race, class and gender within webbed connections of domination" (p. 8). For the postmodernist, differences are situated within narrative accounts and varying dialects. To deconstruct

differences means redrawing the maps of personal and social history, while concurrently pragmatizing and sensitizing the everyday actions and language of social actors to race, class, and gender struggles.

Within this postmodern condition of "difference," the locus of power shifts from the privileged, the powerful, and those who control, to those struggling groups of people (females and minorities) who seek a measure of control over their own lives. Women's studies in the field of education (e.g., Weiler, 1987; Grumet, 1988) exhibit signs of this postmodern dialogue. The female narrative voice constitutes a discourse that considers difference as one of the vital links to a notion of schools as sites both of gender struggle and of transformative and liberating responses to the hegemonic conditions (in this particular case, patriarchal influences on social relations) of our times.

The major strength of current theories of postmodernism discourse is the potential for infinite deconstruction of meaning. Yet, quite ironically, this strength has also become a weakness: it seems that what is lost within the infinite deconstruction of meaning is *shared* meaning. What could be seen as central to the discourse of difference and disharmony as a referent for critique and advancing emancipatory possibilities is the notion of identity within solidarity, unity, and commonality. Moore (1990) puts it well, I believe, when she comments on Nicholson (1990):

In the politics of identity there is a mindless celebration of difference as though differences, whether race or gender, operated equally. Everyone knows, surely, that some differences are more different than others. (p. 41)

Gitlin (1990) agrees with Moore, furthering her argument by situating difference in the context of a more radical political dialogue:

America today, along with its Left, suffers from an exhalation of difference--as if commonality were not also a value. While the Left brandishes the rainbow or the quilt, the Right wraps itself in the flag of "common culture" . . . Functionally, the Left has limited itself to those who think of themselves as members of one or another tribe . . . On what common ground do we (Left) meet to cooperate? (p. 48)

With Gitlin's notion of "common ground" in mind, I argue that the deconstruction of difference and identity by postmodernists (including both educational postmodernists and, for our purposes here, Pennycook) has not allowed for the exploration of similarities of struggle, affirmation, and hope that lead to notions of community, identity, and their interrelatedness. Also missing is a notion of solidarity of difference and/or commonality of difference that connects people to common democratic struggles in an effort to end subordination.⁵ To further the modern/postmodern debate, a theory is needed to interrelate "common ground" and "difference."

Similarity within Difference: The Other

One way to bridge the modern and postmodern debate *without* seeking closure for ultimate truth is to theorize about similarity within differences. To do so would allow educators to empathize and better understand marginalized peoples. At the base of anyone's difference, I argue, lie the similarities of oppression, pain, and feelings, albeit in different forms. For instance, all immigrants share similar experiences. Some immigrants are hegemonized by a patriarchal father and subservient mother. Other immigrants may live as minorities in foreign countries, illiterate in the dominant language. Some immigrants assimilate into a new culture better than others. Many share a low socio-economic status and the drudgery of alienating work. Yet, there is no reason why I as an educator cannot empathize with marginalized peoples though I could never meet them all. Given my own life experiences, I can identify with those who have felt alienation and certain forms of suffering and oppression, even though our respective particular circumstances may have differed.

What is sorely lacking within postmodern literature, then, (including Pennycook's article) is attention to both a theory and politics of similarity within difference and a politics of identity "that highlights questions of equality, justice and liberty as part of an ongoing democratic struggle" (Giroux, 1990, p. 13) in which race and ethnicity become the "center of a radical politics of democracy differences and cultural struggle" (Giroux, 1990, p. 3).

Central to a politics of similarity within difference is empathizing with the other,⁶ an "other" which can be used

interchangeably to mean marginalized peoples or the empathetic incorporation of the attitudes and values of the community one teaches in. To empathize with either of these forms of "other" is to transcend one's own view of what counts as correct culture, and, instead, understand, incorporate, and change oneself within the other culture for a common, intersubjective, emancipatory purpose.

To understand and empathize with the "other" becomes a postmodern challenge which assumes different forms within different areas of popular culture, such as cinema, art, dance, and theatre (Giroux & Simon, 1988, 1989). No less important for postmodernists is to connect the struggle and resistance of different groups to a theory that highlights commonality, community, and sharing. While the identity of struggles could first be viewed as bound within their discursive difference in place, time, and meaning, they are also connected by their commonality--possibly as an attempt to end alienation, oppression, and subordination.

Practical examples from qualitative research on teachers in the field of education may help clarify similar, yet concurrently different, struggles (Kanpol, 1988, 1989, 1990, forthcoming [a], [b], [c], [d]). The differences of these teachers' struggles have involved power relationships with administrations, gender and race struggles, and continual battles to use teacher-generated pragmatic curricula rather than officially mandated ones. Yet, the similarities of these struggles have revolved around teachers challenging dehumanizing rating scales, alienating accountability schemes, rigid rule structures, uncreative "teacher-proof" standardized curricula, and authoritarian on-site management. Both in and out of class, teachers in these studies found ways to challenge dominant ideological propensities, such as rampant individualism and negative competition.⁷ Such teacher challenges to dominant values had at their base the commonality of a democratic discourse that deconstructed difference yet seriously considered similarities. Indeed, these cultural and value-based struggles represented the *politicizing of schools* in and out of the classroom in the most practical sense. Educational researchers (e.g., Willis, 1977; Apple, 1986; Fine, 1988; Ellsworth, 1989; McLaren, 1989) provide a context for viewing the practical and ideological struggles of male and female students as well as the practical and ideological struggles of teachers within issues of curriculum development and implementation, race, class, and sex. What is suggested in these studies is a dialectic of modernist and postmodernist theoretical discourse that seeks to politicize schools by revealing how power

and authority as well as similarity and difference are negotiated in practice.

Similarity within Difference as Applied to Critical Applied Linguistics

As a response to what I consider to be the first major weakness in Pennycook's article, I have suggested in essence that "critical applied linguistics" become even *more* political and emancipatory in its theorizing than Pennycook's call for a "principled postmodernism": that we consider similarities within difference as an *extension* of a theory of postmodern applied linguistics concerned merely with the politics and ethics of difference. In response to the second major weakness of Pennycook's article, I want to suggest a practical agenda for ESL teachers and critical applied linguists, which necessitates seriously considering the use of critical pedagogy as a teaching tool.

At this point I must mention some surprise at Pennycook for overlooking the work of the leading critical pedagogue of our times, Paulo Freire (1974, 1985), as a reference for a political agenda in critical applied linguistics. Freire's associations with peasant workers led him to conclude that language cannot be separated from social and political conditions. He thus sought to promote the cultural transformation of the peasants by revising their critical consciousness and engaging them in a struggle against oppressive social structures. In order to help achieve this goal, Freire linked peasants' vocabulary, ideas, and values to their lives. Interestingly, these peasant struggles, while individually different, were bound by their commonality to end their alienation, oppression, and subordination. In the spirit of Freire, what I am about to offer is not a prescription of "what to do on Monday morning" or how, but, rather, a principled, political, practical, and "Freirian" account of what a theory of similarities within difference might look like in real classroom situations.

In a recently completed naturalistic study (Kanpol, forthcoming [c], [d]) in a school where the student population was 82% Hispanic, four of the five teachers studied were English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Interestingly, their pedagogical strategies were directly linked to the kind of postmodernism that I have been theorizing about, for within their pedagogy, community,

difference, and similarity were celebrated. This orientation became, whether consciously or unconsciously, these teachers' critical pedagogy. Before I highlight these points with three examples, I ask the reader to keep two thoughts in mind. First, the following examples revolve around teacher-student interaction in some form. Second, these examples connect the positive traits of modernism--community, reflection and human possibility--with the postmodern challenge to both accept and understand difference.

1. Use of Text to Recall History

In one ESL class, a short story, "The Lady or the Tiger" (Stockton, 1980), was used as the basis for a vocabulary, comprehension, and structured grammar lesson. But the story was also used to generate discussion about individual choice, freedom, and the question "what is right?" The Egyptian ESL teacher began the class by recounting her history: her entrance and the hardships she faced as an immigrant to the United States. She then encouraged discussion on individual differences and choice in each student's life. Yet the students' differences were combined with similarity when the text was introduced as a depiction of the dilemmas faced by everyone when confronted with free choice. The result was that a sense of community grew out of similarity within differences. While the ESL language-teaching context was important to this teacher, it was clearly an enterprise secondary to the more pressing issues of developing political awareness about choice, freedom, and right in student's minds.

2. Use of Film to Question Stereotypes

In another ESL class, a teacher who had previously lived in Mexico for three years showed her students a Spanish-language film with English subtitles.⁸ The film was used for vocabulary practice and discussion, but, more typically, to develop communicative competence. The hidden curriculum⁹ of the lesson involved making the students aware of the plot in which the stereotypic macho and patriarchal father uses all his guile to woo his daughter into sexual submission. When she refuses, he locks her up in an attic in their house without access to food or water. The film ends with the daughter denying her father's advances and dying of starvation in

his arms. The ensuing discussion in class revolved around the issues of stereotype and rightness, among other matters. Interestingly, 75% of this class were males. Some admitted that the macho image of males in their households was not much different from that depicted in the film. Others admitted that in their families men were not like the father in the film. It was clear that the students had had different male and female experiences, yet had shared similar confrontations with sexual stereotypes. The teacher eventually revealed her intent to challenge students' stereotypes, and in the context of this ESL lesson students *were* challenged, through their own similarities and differences, to question and reflect on hegemonic thought processes concerning family ties and sexual roles.

3. Cooperative Learning as a Challenge to Individualism: A Move to Individuality

In a third ESL class, a teacher facilitated language games, puzzles, and exercises with synonyms and antonyms in the context of cooperative learning situations, a pedagogy used, unconsciously I believe, as a form of resistance to individualism. Beyond the English language learned, this teacher downplayed individual testing and excessive competition among students by basing a student's worth on individual and group effort rather than on such dehumanizing criteria as numerical achievement. Students learned to accept individual differences within groups yet responded as a team on issues of vocabulary choice. As tolerance became the denominator of similarity for individual members of groups, despite individual student differences, typical student competition for high grades was deemphasized. Such challenges to dominant ideological propensities can occur (though not always) within the context of "cooperative language learning," and did occur within the context of similarity (tolerance, team effort, sharing) and difference (individual likes and dislikes).

The above examples suggest that the ESL lesson does not only serve a language-teaching purpose but consciously or unconsciously can challenge dominant ideological assumptions. As a theorist/researcher in the social foundations of education, what interests me most in these *practical* examples of similarity within difference are the particular social and political implications which make up the classroom agenda, less so the facilitation of mere

language learning and use. On a more *theoretical* tack, to separate modernism and postmodernism as oppositional, mutually exclusive theoretical formulations simply reinforces division and antagonism among academics (Ellsworth, 1989). Instead, we should search for modernistic similarities within postmodern differences, which in their joint formulation consider multiple realities (containing modern and postmodern aspects) that open up dialogue for any community to flourish, whether in or out of academe.

CONCLUSION

In short, the deconstruction of language with similarities and differences at its core can become an intersubjective, counter-hegemonic, postmodern, political, and applied linguistic project to end oppression. Teachers at all levels of education have the power not only to help students assimilate into the mainstream culture; they can also use "assimilation" as a social and political tool to transform consciousness by bringing into focus the similarities within differences.

The political and practical stances within schools that derive from the heavy theoretical formulations that Pennycook and I have proposed in our dialogue would be manifested by such actions as teachers both questioning and changing the tracking system of ESL students; teachers questioning and redesigning mainstream and gate-keeping exams; teachers taking a stand to choose a curriculum devoid of sexual and racial bias; teachers being better informed about state decision-making which affects all these matters; teachers actively partaking in union activities to improve working conditions. Only when these sorts of issues are acted upon can a truly critical applied linguistics within a postmodernism project become a theoretical referent and a political tool to challenge mainstream consciousness, epistemological certainty, and ideological tentativeness. Only then may the possibility of emancipatory practice be realized as a celebration of differences and a fundamental coming together in union and solidarity over similarities.

Notes

¹For more on the pedagogical and political, see Aronowitz & Giroux's (1985) discussion on the transformative intellectual. For Aronowitz & Giroux, *political* refers specifically to the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (or cultural capital) that transpires between teachers and students. This is the sense of my use of the word 'political' throughout this manuscript.

²Critical pedagogy is used as a teaching strategy to question and be critical of dominant cultural values and power relations such as excess competition, individualism, racism, and sexism. Within this pedagogy, students are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences as they relate to these dominant values. The intent is to help emancipate students from dogmatic to liberating forms of thinking on these issues.

³Pennycook fails to elaborate on the various methods of qualitative research. For instance, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism would surely be a large part of qualitative research and could also be used to illuminate the drawbacks of positivistic applied linguistics. The issue of what *kind* of qualitative research should be used for a critical applied linguistics is an important issue not treated by Pennycook.

⁴A deconstruction of 'difference' is an ongoing debate among philosophers (Derrida, 1986; Wood, 1987).

⁵Due to space limitations, I have avoided a discussion of the democratic nature of struggle. In my upcoming book, I deal with these issues in far greater depth (Kanpol, forthcoming [c]). For further discussion on democratic struggle, see Laclau & Mouffe (1985), Laclau (1988), and Mouffe (1988). The nature of this struggle is intimately connected to intersubjective conditions of existence. For an excellent discussion on intersubjectivity, see Dallmayr (1981), especially Chapter 2.

⁶Pennycook sporadically refers to the "other" without elaborating how this "other" has its own voice, language, history, etc.

⁷Negative competition can be compared to positive competition. The latter implies competition without conflict, conforming to rules in a context in which the goals for everyone are just. Negative competition creates disharmony (conflict) among group members since the goals for everyone are discriminatory and unfair. For more, see Rich (1988). Rampant individualism in this context refers to the quest for general human supremacy with the goal of domination in mind. Individualism is the opposite of individuality, the prizing of individual talent. For more on this, see Dallmayr (1981, pp. 2-9).

⁸*Delgadina* [film], Audio Post Production, Russian Hill Recording.

⁹The "hidden curriculum" refers to implicit, moral, and ideological assumptions routinely passed on to students. In its strongest and least emancipatory sense, the hidden curriculum refers to the hegemonic body of knowledge that places students in subordinate social positions. For more, see Anyon (1980, 1981).

REFERENCES

- Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162 (1), 67-92.
- Anyon, J. (1981). Social class and school knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 11 (1), 3-42.
- Apple, M. (1986). *Teachers and texts*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Aronowitz, S. & Giroux, H. (1985). *Education under siege*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Dallmayr, F. (1981). *Twilight of subjectivity: Contributions to a post-individualist theory of politics*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Derrida, J. (1986). Differance. In M.C. Taylor (Ed.), *Deconstruction in context* (pp. 396-420). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59 (3), 297-324.
- Fine, M. (1988). Sexuality, schooling and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58 (1), 29-53.
- Freire, P. (1974). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury.
- Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power and liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H. (1990). Post-modernism as border pedagogy: Redefining the boundaries of race and ethnicity. Unpublished manuscript.
- Giroux, H. & Simon, R. (1988). Schooling, popular culture, and a pedagogy of possibility. *Journal of Education*, 170 (1), 9-26.
- Giroux, H. & Simon, R. (1989). *Popular culture, schooling, and everyday life*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Gitlin, T. (1990). Opinion. *Tikkun*, 5 (4), 47-48.
- Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Habermas, J. (1981). *The theory of communicative action*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kanpol, B. (1988). Teacher work tasks as forms of resistance and accommodations to structural factors of schooling. *Urban Education*, 23 (2), 173-187.
- Kanpol, B. (1989). Teacher institutional and cultural political resistance: Necessary conditions for the transformative intellectual. *The Urban Review*, 21 (3), 163-179.
- Kanpol, B. (1990). The similarity within difference: A reply to Ellsworth. *Harvard Educational Review*, 60, 393-395.
- Kanpol, B. (forthcoming [a]). Self and community in a fourth grade global education project: Necessary conditions for the emancipatory agenda. *The Urban Review*.
- Kanpol, B. (forthcoming [b]). Teacher group formation as emancipatory critique: Necessary conditions for teacher resistance. *Journal of Educational Thought*.
- Kanpol, B. (forthcoming [c]). *Toward a postmodern theory and practice of teacher cultural politics*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Kanpol, B. (forthcoming [d]). The politics of similarity within difference: A pedagogy for the other. *The Urban Review*.
- Laclau, E. (1988). Metaphor and social antagonisms. In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 249-257). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy*. London: Verso.
- McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools*. Longman: New York.
- Moore, S. (1990, May). Identity shifts. *Marxism Today*, p. 41.
- Mouffe, C. (1988). Hegemony and new political subjects: Toward a new concept of democracy. In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 89-101). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Nicholson, L. (Ed.). (1990). *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge.
- Pennycook, A. (1990). Towards a critical applied linguistics for the 1990's. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 1 (1), 9-28.
- Purpel, D. (1989). *The moral and spiritual crisis in education: A curriculum for justice & compassion in education*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Rich, J. (1988). Competition in education. *Educational Theory* 38 (2), 183-189.
- Stockton, F. (1980). The lady or the tiger. In G. Burtow (Ed.), *Spotlight on Literature* (pp. 52-57). New York: Random House, School Division.
- Weiler, K. (1987). *Women teaching for change: Gender, class and power*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Lexington: Heath.

Wood, D. (1987). Following Derrida. In J. Sallis (Ed.), *Deconstruction and philosophy* (pp. 143-160). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Barry Kanpol, a native Australian and former ESL instructor in the Israeli public schools and at Tel Aviv University, is currently Assistant Professor of Education at Chapman College in Orange, California. His main concerns revolve around the role of ideology, postmodernism, and cultural politics of teachers in public schools.