Critical applied linguistic challenges

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Overview

• Background: What is Critical Applied Linguistics (CALx)?
  • chover no molhado?
  • Influences, domains, origins

• Areas of contemporary work
  • Critical discourse analysis; Critical literacies; Critical sociolinguistics; Critical Pedagogy; Critical language testing

• Four challenges
  • Only critique? Prejudices outcomes? Static epistemology and politics? Local practices?

• Places for renewal
  • New class analysis; posthumanism; new sociolinguistics

• Conclusions
Critical applied linguistics

How does language work in educational, workplace and media contexts?

How might we go about improving the ways this works?

How do we understand such contexts and changes in relation to power, class, gender, race and so forth?

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Domains of CALx

Critical applied linguistics

- Critical sociolinguistics
- Critical bilingualism
- Critical multiculturalism
- Critical literacies
- Critical language testing
- Critical pedagogy
- Anti-racist education
- Feminist pedagogy
- Feminist discourse analysis
- Critical discourse analysis
- Postcolonial discourse analysis

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4 Ds of CALx (following Janks)

- **dominion** (the contingent and contextual effects of power)
- **disparity** (inequitable access to material and cultural goods)
- **desire** (the interlocking operations of ideology, agency and identity)
- **difference** (an engagement with diversity and an ambition to transform)
Geopolitical and temporal questions

Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970)

Critical literacy and critical pedagogy (USA: 1980s)

Critical discourse analysis (UK 1980s)

Critical applied linguistics (1990s)

Vološinov

Foucault

Fanon

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“Enseñar no es transferir conocimiento, es crear la posibilidad de producirlo.”

PAULO FREIRE
Critical influences

- Critical Theory
- Feminist Studies
- Continental philosophy
- Anti-racist education
- Critical literacy
- Queer studies and performativity
- Postcolonial studies
- Posthumanism

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CDA

In the introduction to the journal *Critical Discourse Studies*, Fairclough, Graham, Lemke and Wodak (2004) locate their work within a broader field of critical social research and the growing awareness that major social issues such as the effects of global capitalism, issues of gender and sexuality, differential relations of power between languages, the need for critical citizenship, discrimination in terms of age or race, changing identities in relation to new transnational structures, and changes to new communication media, are “to some significant degree, problems of discourse” (p.2).
Critical literacies

• Critical literacy “marks out a coalition of educational interests committed to engaging with the possibilities that the technologies of writing and other modes of inscription offer for social change, cultural diversity, economic equity, and political enfranchisement” (Luke and Freebody, 1997, p.1)
Critical literacy practices

• Seven commonalities
  • Drawing on lived experience
  • Language as social semiotic
  • Focus on power locally and globally
  • Engaging with the everyday
  • Self-reflexive practice
  • Renewing a sense of community
  • Establishing shared pragmatic and political goals
ELT, globalisation and sexuality

As Motha and Lin (2014: 332) contend ‘at the center of every English language learning moment lies desire: desire for the language; for the identities represented by particular accents and varieties of English; for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks.’

Appleby’s (2014) work looks critically at men, masculinity and heterosexuality in global English language teaching, the idealisation of white male bodies, the impact of male bonding, and the effects of marriage, singleness, and sexual desire on men's personal lives, and professional aspirations.
Critical language testing

- **critical language testing** (CLT) “implies the need to develop critical strategies to examine the uses and consequences of tests, to monitor their power, minimize their detrimental force, reveal the misuses, and empower the test takers” (Shohamy 2001, p.131).
- “Not granting citizenship on the grounds of language is a violation of basic human/personal rights to welfare, education and other social benefits.” (McNamara and Shohamy, 2008, p. 93)
Critical sociolinguistics

• Sociolinguistics has been criticised for its inadequate theory of power and for its lack of an agenda for social change. Mey (1985) called for a “critical sociolinguistics” that can “establish a connection between people’s place in the societal hierarchy, and the linguistic and other kinds of oppression that they are subjected to at different levels” (p.342).

• The more recent critical sociolinguistic work of Eades (2010) sheds light on and attempts to change discriminatory aspects of the legal system, particularly in relation to Indigenous Australians.
CALx: 4 challenges

1. Is CALx only about critique?

Davies (1999) defines CALx as “a judgemental approach by some applied linguists to ‘normal’ applied linguistics on the grounds that it is not concerned with the transformation of society” (p.145), and critiques CALx as “dismissive totally of the attempt since the 1950s to develop a coherent applied linguistics” (Davies, 1999, p.141). He also suggests CALx “refrains from proposing interventions and explanations” 2005, (p.32)

CALx as a site of renewal

- Coherence and disciplinarity are not necessarily good goals
- “The very existence of a transgressive critical applied linguistics which attacks the foundations and goals of applied linguistics is perhaps a sign that applied linguistics is a discipline which has come of age” (Elder, 2004, p.430).
- Calx is in fact a site of renewal for applied linguistics, and indeed suggests both interventions and explanations.
2. Is CALx too predetermined to do objective analysis?

- CALx’s overt political stance on issues of inequality, racism, sexism or homophobia unacceptably “prejudges outcomes” (Davies, 2005, p.32)
- By taking an *a priori* critical stance (rather than maintaining a critical distance - to use a different sense of the critical), CALx may impose its own views on the objects of inquiry, taking inappropriate stances on the social world that may be hypocritical because of the impossibility of choosing between different ethical and political concerns (Widdowson, 2001).

The centrality of political and ethical concerns

- The critique itself rests on a political position (and ignores its own *locus of enunciation*).
- While the warning about doing bad research or jumping to hasty conclusions needs to be heard, It is mainstream ALx that is hypocritical if it seeks to maintain a belief in critical distance while suggesting it is impossible to take a moral or political stance on (or simply ignore) the very real social, political and ethical concerns that inevitably come to bear on any applied linguistic context.
CALx: 4 challenges

3. How to avoid static politics and static epistemology?

• Too much of CALx operates with the addition of a normative politics to a normative applied linguistics.
• Has the notion of the critical run our of steam?
• What happens when everybody becomes critical?

Thinking otherwise and problematizing practice

• Critical applied linguistic work entails both a capacity to bring wider questions of social, cultural and political critique to our contexts of work but also to step outside our frameworks of thought, to think otherwise.
• To be critical,” as Luke reminds us, “is to call up for scrutiny, whether through embodied action or discourse practice, the rules of exchange within a social field.” This entails “an epistemological Othering and ‘doubling’ of the world – a sense of being beside oneself or outside of oneself in another epistemological, discourse, and political space than one typically would inhabit” (2004, p26).
CALx: 4 challenges

4. How to ensure Calx isn’t another project of Northern imposition?

The challenge to ensure that “the research agenda is formulated in collaboration and consultation with local communities” (Makoni, 2003, p.135) in order not only to develop a relationship between this field of critical scholarship and local knowledge and practice but also to encourage the development of CALx as localized practice.
New directions: Class and the precariat

We need to reengage with questions of class (Block, 2014) but globalization has fragmented national class structures and produced a mobile, insecure, workforce. Standing’s (2014) discussion of the precariat (a new proletariat in precarious work) has important implications for applied linguistics. Globally, the precariat is now made up of a vast number of migrant workers, from cleaners to construction site workers, a class that poses problems for classic class analysis because of its mobility and dispersion and the very unlikelihood of its capacity to organize in opposition.
New directions: Posthumanism

• The posthuman condition introduces a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (Braidotti, 2013, pp1-2)

• The “common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself” (Braidotti, 2013, p2)

• Questioning distinctions between
  • Humans and nonhuman
  • Knowing subjects and known objects
  • Rationality and emotion
  • People and place
New directions: The translingual turn

• Multilingualism, “is the topic du jour, at least in critical applied linguistics” (May, 2014 p.1).
• “What would language education look like,” asks García (2007, p. xiii), “if we no longer posited the existence of separate languages?”

• García and Li Wei (2014) explain translanguaging as “an approach to the use of language, bilingualism and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages” (p. 2)

What makes it critical?

- What makes any of these (translingual, posthumanist etc) critical?

  - Challenging epistemologies while also challenging inequalities
  - Focusing on dominion, disparity, difference and desire
  - Social semiotic approaches to language that bring in the body, place, senses, feelings, affect
  - Drawing on lived experience and the everyday
  - Working towards social change and a renewal of community
  - A focus on ‘language, action and transformation’
Concluding thoughts

- Does the first ICCAL – International Conference of Critical Applied Linguistics – mean that CALx has now come of age? And is that a good or a bad thing?
- How can we avoid CALx becoming reified, fixed, regimented, exclusivist, a new school?
- Has the term critical become overused? Do we need to find alternative ways of framing this work?
- How to steer a careful path between the new ideas and terminologies? How to be flexible to new ways of thinking without becoming too vulnerable to change?
- What new challenges do we face in an era of neoliberalism, virtual worlds, new technologies, new social formations, environmental degradation, mass mobilities, and so on?
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