

Review on Language Studies & Globalization

Books:

- Fairclough, Norman. (2006). *Language and globalization*. London: Routledge.
- Wu, Doreen D. (Ed.) (2008). *Discourses of cultural China in the globalizing age*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, much literature in the disciplines of sociology, economy, politics and history, etc., has been devoted to the theme of globalization, but not so much in language studies. The role of language in globalization and the relationship between language studies and globalization cannot be emphasized more, not only in that globalization necessarily involves the globalization and mobility of language, but also in that language is an important globalizing force. The publication of the three volumes on language and globalization signals a changing landscape in research issues, approaches, and outcomes in language studies in the age of globalization. This review attempts to highlight a number of such changes as observed in these books, to recognize the consensus and differences manifested therein and finally to identify directions for future research.

2. Perceptions of Language and Globalization

The key features of globalization are mobility and interconnectedness. Mobility of goods, services, and people necessarily involves that of discourse, manifested in “flows of representations, narratives, and discourses” (Fairclough, 2006, p. 2). What used to be “sedentary” or “territorialized” patterns of language use are complemented by “translocal” or “deterritorialized” forms of language use, and the combination of both often accounts for unexpected sociolinguistic effects (Blommaert, 2010). Geographical borders are no longer adequate to account for changes in language and culture, as communities are increasingly defined by the culture, values, and patterns of language use their members share and identify with. With already a big population in Greater China, the diaspora of Chinese immigrants to other continents further contributes to the emergence of Cultural China, a symbolically and culturally defined community (Wu, 2008).

Therefore, language is no longer viewed as much of an independent, clearly defined entity such as “English” and “Chinese” within the state borders, but a mobile entity that involves

constant interactions between various parties, forces, and processes related to language use. The perceptions of language studies and globalization presented in the three volumes, each with their own distinctive features, can be summarized in three dialectic arguments.

In alignment with the overarching argument in Fairclough's earlier works (e.g. 1992) that discourse is shaping society and is also being shaped by society, the defining dialectics of Fairclough (2006) is on the interaction between language/discourse and the reality of globalization: the discourses of globalization do not merely represent processes and tendencies of globalization which are happening independently; they can under certain conditions also contribute to creating and shaping actual processes of globalization. The leading dialectics of Wu (2008) consists in the interaction, centering on the notion of "glocalization", between local and global discourse/culture, during which discourses struggle, compete and eventually get hybridized and reinvented. The main Blommaert (2010) dialectics lies in the interaction between vertical and horizontal forces, viewing each spatial community also as one that is hierarchical and stratified, where "all sorts of socially, culturally, and politically salient distinctions occur" (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, p. 368).

The changing world reality motivates changing perceptions, as mentioned above, which then leads to the changing mission of language and communication scholars. This area of study is no longer the study of language diffusion or distribution, but the study of language of mobility, which is a recurring theme across the three volumes.

3. Methodologies

Readers of these books will benefit from the diverse and innovative methodologies adopted by the volumes in approaching the complex phenomenon of language in mobility enabled by globalization, which is like catching a moving target.

Fairclough (2006) adopts a revised CDA model as a systematic method, a version of critical discourse analysis embedded within a "cultural" approach to political economy. With an interdisciplinary tone, this version of CDA is a particular synthesis of CDA and a version of "political economy", which is being called "cultural political economy approach" as it extends the general point that economies are necessarily embedded in (and conditional upon) other social fields including culture and discourse (p. 10). Meanwhile, the book is organized in an agent-driven manner. He identifies five main agencies of discourse in globalization: academic analysis, governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies, the media, and people in everyday life, each contributing to an empirical chapter. He argues that a detailed textual analysis is necessary to determine how different levels of semiotic expression interact to constitute orders of discourse and how these interact with other aspects of social practice (p. 11).

Therefore, the empirical chapters are all dedicated to textual analyses of globalization discourses, which draw on a wide range of countries and topics, representing subject, geographical, and thematic diversity. The leading examples include the neo-liberal discourse of globalism, documents involved in Romania's higher education reform and the Bologna process upon its transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in preparation of its recent entry into the European Union, Romania's political branding and the Romanian edition of the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, the discourse of the "war on terror".

Boldly criticizing the work of Trudgill and Labov as “superficial” (p. 4) and Fairclough’s (2006) as with “a serious theoretical flaw” (p. 15), Blommaert (2010) proudly labels his own methodology as “theoretically oriented while empirically grounded” (p. 4), incorporating an ethnographic approach influenced by American anthropological linguistics. He first proposes a “conceptual toolkit” consisting of key notions such as “scale”, “orders of indexicality”, and “polycentricity” and then illustrates these new metaphors and how to use them to describe and interpret various instances of language in mobility, calling for a paradigm shift from “languages (primarily an ideological and institutional construct) to resources (the actual and observable ways of using language)” (p. 102).

His data for illustration comes from a wide array of sources, including the use of French in Japanese advertising, the commercial programs selling the American accent, the sociolinguistic patterns in a Tanzanian novel, the errors and deviant English writing that occurs in a South African high school, the language of fraud emails, an asylum application in the UK from a man claiming to come from Rwanda, and even hip-hop in Tanzania. Two are analyzed at length: *The Invisible Enterprises of the Patriots*, the Swahili novel (Ruhumbika, 1991), and the asylum application. Both cases highlight the synchronism of different semiotic resources which results in a reordering of normativity, or juxtaposition of structure, meaning and function. In this way Blommaert emphasizes the role of local resources in the meaning making of mobile linguistic resources, which attests to inequality between peripherality and centrality in the age of globalization.

When both Fairclough and Blommaert study language and globalization but solely collect their discourse data in English (with occasionally snatches of Romanian and Swahili only), it is difficult to achieve fair representativeness in the study. In this sense, Wu (2008) makes a timely and fitting complement. This volume is the first book-size discourse studies on globalization in non-Western societies, which breaks away from the dominant focus on first-world societies in CDA. The volume is also more culturally than politically or economically focused, drawing on more data from media and popular culture in Cultural China, the last two categories of discourse agencies in Fairclough’s terms.

Seeing Cultural China as culturally and discursively defined, the volume bridges language-oriented disciplines and other social sciences, featuring cross-disciplinary and multicultural perspectives. The notion of glocalization is tapped to address “discursive appropriation” and “discursive reinvention”. Methods of analysis presented in empirical studies are eclectic, embracing conversational analysis and genre analysis from linguistics, content analysis and rhetorical analysis from communication studies, survey and interview techniques from sociology, and mixed approaches. Data is drawn from a variety of domains, including political rhetoric, media communication, corporate websites, social values, popular culture, across populous Chinese communities like Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.

At this point, it is not difficult to see that, while they each have distinctive orientations, all three authors share some elements of a theoretical and methodological framework in which they advocate an interdisciplinary commitment to approaching language and globalization. They deliberately break away from the immobile, self-contained patterns of the once purely linguistic studies that give inadequate considerations to the various complex ways language interacts with reality and the ensuing outcomes and effects. It is this refreshed vision of language

studies that makes an integrated review paper on the three volumes possible.

4. Evaluation in Summary

Fairclough (2006), consistent with his previous works, shows a high degree of systematicity in analyzing discourses of globalization. Instances of discourses of globalization, mainly drawn from nation states, show his sustained interest in language, power, and ideology. The revised and enriched model of critical discourse analysis, as proposed and first tested in the same volume, experiences initial success in updating political economy to cultural political economy in the framework. By so doing, Fairclough manages to expand the explanatory power of the revised CDA model and increases its potential of continuing to be a mainstream approach in discourse analysis.

However, the macro-analysis perspective of the work is restricted to globalism, which is neither a fair nor favorable representative of globalization, invoking an impression that globalization is necessarily a process suffering from inequality between Western and non-Western communities. When discourses are used as strategies for agents to fulfill their goals in reality, there are many cases in which powerful agents like the U.S. government succeed in doing so, but not so much in how weaker agents can benefit from their own discourses. While it is valuable that the author, as a Western scholar, criticizes Western hegemony, analyzing hegemony-related or -generated discourse only risks reinforcing the impression of Western hegemony in academia.

Blommaert (2010) should be remembered for its handshake with anthropological methods, which renders various benefits such as accessing and analyzing a wide range of empirical data, creating the witty metaphor of mobile linguistic resources as the “cultural belongings” of mobile people, a good combination of macro-level and micro-level analysis, and a more tolerant attitude towards deviations of language use such as those in the South African school that are viewed as a problem but also a creative solution.

Brave as the volume is, from what is reviewed above, there are important similarities with Fairclough (2006), and thus making his boldness appear hasty in branding his own paradigm. Though claiming to be theoretically oriented and aiming to construct “the sociolinguistics of globalization”, as the author himself admits, the volume is “a sociolinguistics of globalization”. In light of the more or less high-profile title of the book, a reader might be somehow disappointed in not being able to find a well-structured, coherent model like Fairclough’s.

Locally grounded and globally minded, Wu (2008) should be celebrated as the first book-size discourse studies on globalization in non-Western societies. The volume duly earns the good stature not only because of its empirical data from Cultural China, the most prominent non-Western community, but also of its exceptional and original alignment with glocalization in the editorial piece.

As Fairclough observes, to be seen as plausible and to be taken up and invested in, narratives need to resonate with people’s experience of the world as it actually is (p. 16). Blommaert also notes “an influence from the global and, to be sure, places do change, but the local is quite resilient as well and local criteria and norms define the processes of change” (p. 23). However, the two volumes let go of the issue of interlocking global and local forces, but are instead more

concerned with macro-analysis and inequality. In this respect, Wu (2008), built on the notion of “glocalization” and with a developmental perspective, is the only one that explicitly addresses the mechanism of this interaction and leads a good start to examine the specifics of the notion and the mechanism of glocalization, whose key lies in whether and how the local and the global forces “resonate”.

Another valuable contribution of Wu (2008) is its timely recognition of in-depth and in-detail knowledge and experience in local discourse and cultures, for without such knowledge and experience, there could hardly be adequate space for identification of glocalized discourses and products.

However, meaningful and pro-diversity as eclecticism is, it more or less diffuses the identity and the possibility of an overarching glocalization-derived approach and potentially crowds out more coherent articulation of important notions such as “discursive appropriation”, “discursive reinvention” and “hybridization”.

By all means, a comparative reading of the three volumes renders a fresh, thought-provoking, and complementary experience to readers who are interested either in language studies or in globalization alone or in both, and sometimes entertaining moments because of the well-selected examples across communities. Any weaknesses therein only attest to the complexity of the issue of language and globalization and direct aspiring scholars to meaningful topics for future research.

5. Directions for Future Research

First proposed by Robertson (1995), the notion “glocalization” is viewed as an alternative to that of “globalization” which seems to emphasize cultural convergence and a pre-assigned dominance of the West. Relatively new, “glocalization” is still a philosophical and holistic idea, harboring much potential to evolve into more specific, analytical, multidimensional, and operationalizable frameworks, awaiting more research in the future.

There is much “intuitive feel” that successful glocalization of certain discourses or cultural traits/forms can only take place when there is “resonance”, “echo” or a hinge point that is felt by the prospective host culture or community, be they intended target audiences or incidental overhearers. But exactly how this kind of “resonance mechanism” works and can be projected is the key to understanding the process of glocalization, which is unfortunately under-explored. It should be noted that not everything is globalizable or glocalizable. The possibilities and shapes of outcomes of globalization/glocalization depend on many variables. It will be important for future studies to identify and evaluate the key variables, the prospects of glocalized, hybridized, or reinvented discourses and products, including reception studies on the part of sense makers of such discourses and products. The mechanism of glocalization is of central importance, esp. when considering that glocalization is more of a process than an outcome.

Building on glocalization, Wu (2008) proposes several useful analytical notions such as “discursive appropriation” and “discursive reinvention”. Future research may attempt to describe and interpret the two notions with more detailed and in-depth explanations of distinctions and relationships between the two as well as their respective circumstances of behavior.

Another issue future studies cannot afford to ignore is the discourse of globalization as

related to new media, more typically social media. Prominent social media forms (unfortunately best known as the trademarks of several prominent companies) such as Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), YouTube (2005), Instagram (2010), LinkedIn, etc. were mostly very young at the time of writing of the volumes. However, they have developed so rapidly and become indispensable not only to the lives of millions of people, but to the media landscape and predictably to the ecology of globalization. Websites are genres, social networking profiles are genres, and microblogs too are genres. The characteristics, functions, effects and constructive power of these new genres offer plenty of research topics for language and communication scholars.

For governments, companies, universities, media outlets, and people in the street, changes brought by and enabled by social media are significant. In most general terms, people who traditionally used the Internet to expend content by either reading it or watching it, have now started utilizing platforms – content sharing sites, blogs, social networking, and wikis – to create, modify, share and discuss Internet content. The computer-mediated mode of communication takes place in a many-to-many, open and dynamic, and networked environment, which constantly consolidates globalization. Perhaps the leading implication is that it has substantially enabled and encouraged “globalization from below”, i.e., people in everyday life. Recalling Fairclough’s five main agencies, people in everyday life are most numerous but with disproportionate influence upon globalization and discourse globalization, when compared with powerful states and organizations.

Last but not least, future studies may pay attention to non-Western cultural and linguistic communities and their ecology of mobility, at least starting with relatively populous ones such as Chinese, Spanish and Portuguese. The rising status of these two languages is closely linked to the rising economic, political and cultural influence of the nation states they are most affiliated with: China, Mexico, and Brazil. Economic prosperity and cultural richness are important pulling factors that could counterbalance the one-way flow of discourse resources from the West to non-Western communities. To achieve a better understanding and study of these communities, it is necessary to give full play to anthropological and sociological perspectives and approaches in the hope of gaining more insiders’ or at least participants’ knowledge and experience, which will shed light on analyzing and interpreting their discourses of globalization.

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Reviewer Note

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