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Languages ontologies in higher education: the world-making practices of language teachers

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Abstract: In this paper, we engage the frame of *language ontologies* to explore what language is or might be, *vis-à-vis* empirical data from practicing language teachers and researchers. We conducted semi-structured interviews with fourteen participants to explore their accounts and self-reported practices of language(s)/languaging. We present five ontological accounts of language(s)/languaging as shared by the participants during the interviews: language as a tool for communication, language as thought, language as culture, language as system, and languaging as practice. We discuss the implications of these five ontological accounts for teaching, learning, and understanding language as a multiplicity.

Keywords: language ontologies; languages(s)/languaging; language education; political ontology; assemblages

1 Introduction

Drawing on the notion of *political ontology* (Blaser 2009, 2013, 2018), this paper empirically grounds recent work experimenting with language ontologies. In previous research, we have explored the *worlding of language(s)/languaging* theoretically (Demuro and Gurney 2021), but we have yet to contextualize these ideas within the concrete views and experiences of individuals. The term language(s)/languaging is employed to capture salient strands of theoretical work in language studies: it refers to language (expansively), language*s* (named and enumerated), and languag*ing* (as action or practice, sometimes written with the prefix *trans*). In bringing these terms together, we do not wish to erase the differences between them; on the contrary, we want to emphasize that what we mean when we talk about 'language' is

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often a range of different practices and ideas, some of which fit together compatibly, while others do not. We define language as a becoming: 'that is, there is no independently existing Language out there, but rather ways in which we bring languages/languaging into being, which are contingent on the practices, stories, performances, and enactments that underlie (pre)ontological accounts' (Demuro and Gurney 2021: 5)

In this paper, we explore language ontologies as shared by practicing language teachers and researchers working at the tertiary level in Australia and New Zealand. We engaged these participants in semi-structured interviews to explore their accounts and reported practices of language(s)/languaging. As professionals whose work orients specifically around this domain, as well as individuals who use and encounter language in their daily lives, the interviewees provide valuable insight into the multiplicity of language via their understandings, practices, and encounters.

1.1 Theoretical framework: political ontology and language(s)/languaging

To frame ontology, and to provide a novel account of what language *is* or *might* be, we draw on the ontological turn in anthropology (Heywood 2017; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Paleček and Risjord 2013) and the frame of political ontology – in particular the work of Mario Blaser and colleagues (Blaser 2009, 2013, 2016, 2018; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). This approach allows us to explore language as a multiplicity, rather than attempting to establish, add to, or embellish a singular definition. It also steers us away from the quest to arrive at an ultimately 'true' or 'correct' definition of what language is, although recognising anything as a multiplicity inevitably brings about questions concerning how the practices and performances that make it up fit together. However, if we approach language as a form of social practice, then the quest to define language definitively (that is, once and for all) is not particularly useful. Rather, the aim here is to better comprehend and explore what language means to those who use it, and how it is brought into being through practices, across individuals and groups. In addition, we step away from the hierarchization of language practices and accounts, and resist casting any of these as (in)complete, (un)comprehensive, or (in)accurate.

There is a significant amount of work in applied linguistics which does orient towards arriving at a comprehensive definition of language, much of which is ontological in nature, although it is not always labelled as such. Much of this work is critical of entrenched approaches in the field and includes the significant and growing body of work in (trans)languaging and semiotic assemblages (Li 2011, 2018; Otheguy et al. 2015; Pennycook 2017; Pennycook and Otsuji 2017). The multilingual

turn has generated a productive and lively debate around what language *is* and how we can better understand it as we use, encounter and attempt to teach it. Finding merit in this debate, we have contributed to this body of work ourselves (Gurney and Demuro 2022a, 2022b). It is not our aim here to critique or defend such work, or to assert language ontologies as 'the' definitive account of language(s)/languaging. Furthermore, we do not wish to locate any form of 'truth' concerning language *within* individuals, reinscribing solipsism or recentering the individual as the sole locus of enunciation[1] (Grosfoguel 2008). In this article, we do something different. That is, we attempt to understand language(s)/languaging from the ground up: *through the accounts and practices of language users*, who are based within particular social and professional contexts, but are also able to reflect on their circumstances and arrive at their own stories and interpretations. We have chosen as the participants language educators and researchers working in higher education in Australia and New Zealand. As we explore in relation to the data, this group of participants provides an insightful link between academic discussions in applied linguistics and adjacent fields, and the ways in which language is understood beyond research and educational contexts. Their roles are often transformative – in that they engage in academic research concerning a range of topics relevant to language education – and pragmatic, as they practice within contexts defined by student expectations, teaching and assessment policies, and the expectations of stakeholders beyond higher education, including students' future employers.

Similarly, our task with this paper is as much pragmatic as it is critical, considering the stories of language(s)/languaging circulating broadly within the contexts in which participants operate, live and work, as well as their own accounts which may support or subvert these. Our participant group is uniquely well-positioned to provide these reflections.

The connection between participants' accounts, or understandings, and their practices is acutely captured by Blaser (2013): the stories that we tell are not purely denotive, nor problematic or partial renderings of practices, but rather 'partake in the performance of that which they narrate' (552). Blaser (2013) clarifies:

> [p]olitical ontology is intended neither as a pedagogic project to illuminate a reality that deficient theorizing cannot grasp, nor as a proselytizing project to show the virtues of other, nonmodern blueprints for a good life … Political ontology is closer to hard-nosed pragmatism than to liberal desire to understand everyone. (559)

Blaser (2013) states that 'ontology works with the contradictions between a set of initial assumptions and some body of material that appears to contradict it' (551). In

1 The locus of enunciation can be defined as "the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks" (Grosfoguel 2008: 3).

relation to the nature of the realities that we are discussing, we align with Blaser in casting ontology is a way of *worlding* or enacting some form or aspect of reality. Citing science and technology scholars (Law 2015; Mol 1999, amongst others), Blaser (2013) clarifies that his position is underpinned by a material-semiotic foundation and posits two main points: 1) avoiding the assumption that reality is 'out there', and 2) that 'reality is always in the making through the dynamic relations of hybrid assemblages' (551–552). There is scope within this research to investigate power and agency, or affect, as channeled through such hybrid assemblages – for instance, the differences and affordances associated with particular *worldings*, which may also overlap (see the contributions in de la Cadena et al. 2015 for many examples).

Bringing this into the context of our work in language studies, we use political ontology as follows:

– As a deliberate step away from a 'one-world world', in which all accounts and practices are assessed against a single framework (Law 2015). As applied to language studies, this can look like the hierarchization of language practices as more or less valid or legitimate based on their adherence to a single version of what language is. It also manifests in assumptions about what language is across all users – for instance, asserting that language is fundamentally a code, or that language is fundamentally a tool for communication, and that language users may hold more or less complete understandings of this definition.
– To engage with social practices and stories in relation to how they *make worlds* for individuals. This means 'taking seriously' (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017) the stories which are told about language, and suspending the inclination to apply one's own frameworks or beliefs in an evaluative assessment of others' accounts and practices. It also means thinking critically about the application of frameworks to situations in which those frameworks might not apply. It can involve asking ourselves, as language researchers, about the basis on which we apply the frames we do: for instance, does translanguaging (or any other theoretical concept) necessarily *fit* in this situation?

While our work dovetails with – and, in part, draws inspiration from – critical work within language studies to problematize singular frames for apprehending language, we particularly want to understand *how* language teachers and researchers *understand and create* language(s)/languaging as professionals, and through their self-reported practices.

Language teachers are highly influential professionals. They model and shape language practice for their students; they create, employ and critique curricula and materials; and they assess language performance. Those who hold dual roles as teachers and researchers are doubly implicated within the practice and study of language, dealing with both the theoretical and the practical elements of language.

The forms which language(s)/languaging take for these practitioners – and the ways in which these intersect with other concepts which may be associated with language education, such as culture – are highly relevant in the development of a more comprehensive and grounded understanding of how language is realized and created within the domains in which these participants operate.

Much has been written on languages in higher education, and the significant body of work investigating language teacher cognition argues that what practitioners know, think, believe and feel strongly shapes what they do (Borg 2019). Teachers have agency and the capacity to reflect on their practice, albeit within certain constraints. However, these matters have not yet been framed through the notion of political ontology with a view to understand more expansively what language(s)/languaging *is* to these practitioners and in the contexts where they operate.

2 Research design

Participation in the project involved a semi-structured interview with one of the lead researchers. Due to the qualitative nature of the project, and the amount of data we anticipated the interviews would generate, we aimed to recruit between 10 and 15 participants. This number allowed us to observe variation within and across participants' responses, without treating their responses as representative beyond the participant group. Prospective participants were invited to take part on the basis that they taught language(s) – either languages other than English, or English as an additional language (EAL) – and that they worked at the tertiary level in Australia or New Zealand. We focused on these two geographical contexts primarily because they are the locations in which we are based and with which we have significant professional experience; that is, we understand how the tertiary sectors function and are regulated, and their histories, pressures, and affordances.

Ethics approval to conduct the study was obtained from Deakin University. Participants were provided with the information sheet (which included a background to the project and all interview questions), consent form and withdrawal form when we first contacted them. It was made clear that participants could opt to not answer any questions at their discretion, and that they could withdraw from participation at any stage. Given that we were recruiting partially within our professional networks, there was potential that we knew or had worked with some participants previously. To minimize any possible discomfort, participants were given the opportunity to be interviewed by either one of us, in person or via video conferencing. Finally, in discussing the findings of the project, we have ensured that information which could identify participants, or their institutions of employment, has been removed.

In total, fourteen practicing language teachers and researchers took part in the study. An invitation for participation in the study was circulated via email. Potential participants were identified through publicly available information (i.e., staff professional pages in a university directory), and through professional networks. We received positive responses from individuals working in different kinds of tertiary institutions, including universities and vocational colleges; additionally, some participants also had previous experience teaching at the secondary level. Research experience was not identified as a key criterion for participation; however, many of the participants were also academic researchers or PhD candidates in applied linguistics, education, and/or literary and cultural studies. Some participants had also worked as language teacher educators on TESOL or applied linguistics programs. In line with our aim to recruit 10–15 participants, we decided to close recruitment once we had received fourteen responses.

The interviews were structured around the themes of language, communication, culture, and critical pedagogy. Each of these themes contained several questions. Some questions related specifically to language teaching, while others focused more broadly on language, culture, and communication. For example, under 'communication', the following questions were grouped:

- How does communication relate to language?
- As language teachers, how should our practice respond to the goal of teaching learners to communicate in the target language?
- What might 'effective communication' mean?

As the interviews were semi-structured, the questions were not asked in the exact same way to all participants. Rather, the discussion followed the participants' own interests, and the interviews progressed through the themes according to participants' responses. The interviews were conducted individually, either face-to-face or via video conferencing. They were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. They averaged 60 min in length.

The interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2021). We approached the data looking for the ways in which participants theorized and defined language(s)/languaging. We began by focusing on their responses to one of the interview questions which directly addressed this: *What is language?* However, on familiarizing ourselves with the transcripts further, it became clear that participants' accounts of language were shared at different points during the interview discussions. Furthermore, all participants provided multiple accounts of language(s)/languaging, which required a careful analysis of the transcripts in their entirety. To analyze the transcripts, the data were initially coded inductively to separate out initial definitions of language(s)/languaging. These initial definitions were then refined through an iterative process of reading and comparing

transcripts. Once the definitions were finalized, descriptions were written to explain each as a discrete 'ontological account' of language(s)/languaging.

Data were analyzed across and within the transcripts. The number of times a particular definition of language was mentioned, or the number of participants who mentioned it, were not considered determinants of its validity as an ontological account. This aligns with the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study: we do not claim any of the accounts of language to exist more broadly than the participant group (although it is highly likely that at least some of them do), nor do we claim that the participants are representative of all language educators. *In order to be grouped together to form an ontological account, interview data needed to provide a discrete and plausibly comparable account of language(s)/languaging.* As such, some of the accounts we present in the findings section of this paper were discussed by a larger number of participants, or in relatively more depth, than others. Furthermore, for clarity, we did not use the term 'ontologies' in the interviews with participants. The participants chose to employ a range of terms and concepts to indicate their own understandings and practices of language(s)/languaging, as is evident in their data presented in the findings section below.

As established, we use the frame of ontologies in this paper to step away from the idea of language as singular, and to attempt to understand some of the ways in which participants understood and brought language(s)/languaging into being through their accounts, assumptions, practices, and performances. Ethical procedures were followed throughout, and we have striven for rigour and trustworthiness in analyzing data and reporting the findings; however, we do not claim that the findings represent language(s)/languaging exhaustively. This is a small-scale qualitative research project which aimed to explore participants' understandings rather than provide definitive accounts, and like all qualitative research, we did not intend for these findings to be extrapolated beyond the group of participants. Nonetheless, the findings add an important dimension to how we think about language as a component of languages education. Furthermore, the findings strongly demonstrate the seemingly evident – yet often overlooked – notion of language(s)/languaging as a *simultaneous multiplicity*, and they provide an empirically grounded starting point for how we discuss ontologies of language from the perspectives of language teachers.

3 Research findings: accounts of language(s)/languaging

In this section, we present five ontological accounts of language(s)/languaging shared by the participants during the interviews: language as a tool for communication,

language as thought, language as culture, language as system, and languaging as practice. Each account is presented in a separate subsection below, accompanied by excerpts from participants' interviews. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

3.1 Language as a tool for communication

We begin with the account of language as a tool for communication, which was the most salient in the data. The word 'tool' was used by participants to capture the primarily functional role that language plays in transferring, communicating, and negotiating meaning from person to person. The notion of language as tool was located within shared human experience: language is a way to make sense of things, coordinate and accomplish actions, and build relationships. A comprehensive explanation of language as tool was provided by participant Alessandro, a French language and culture teacher working in New Zealand:

> So, I think communication and language, as probably implicit in my definition of language, they are fundamentally intertwined. The language isn't just about communication […] But I do think, to kind of link back to your previous question on the history of language, the etymology of communication is, is sharing, right? So, what is it that we share? We share ideas, we share values, we share information, and we exchange. So, I do think that that is absolutely fundamental to what defines us as, as human beings, really. (Alessandro)

Like Alessandro's comments, others' accounts of language as a tool treat language expansively, through reference to broad social goals such as sharing and exchanging. Across the range of participants' responses, there is a commonality in defining language as playing a fundamental role in human social behavior.

From this perspective, participants problematized the idea that language was bounded within structured written and spoken systems. Similar accounts to Alessandro's, which prioritized sharing and communication, were provided by participants Teresa, a Spanish language teacher and researcher in New Zealand, and Amanda, an EAL, Spanish and German teacher in Australia. These two participants defined 'any system of communication' and 'all of the […] things that we use to communicate' as language:

> There is a narrow definition of language which will be, when we talk about verbal or written languages or languages, as well, or other languages, but then we could consider language any system of communication. In that sense, we should include music as a type of universal language because it goes directly to our emotions, and you communicate somehow when we listen. (Teresa)

> I think language is so much more than grammar, linguistics, than a lot of what we typically think about with language. I think it's all of the multimodal and trans-semiotic things that we use to communicate. I think that when we think about signed languages, that that's a whole other mode of using a language. And that's definitely language. I think there's all the things that are not vocalized, like […] affect and emotion that come into it, that it does imperceptible things that that form part of language and how we communicate. (Amanda)

Michaela, an EAL teacher in New Zealand, also discussed a broad range of practices and artefacts, from physical gestures to symbols and drawings, which met the goal of communication and therefore were seen to constitute language:

> So, what I think is that language is the way it is, the way we communicate, one of the ways we communicate to others, what is arising in our consciousness, basically. So, um, it doesn't have to be verbal. So, I would say some examples of language could be of course, using your hands, body gestures, um, even drawings, pictographs, and of course words because they all represent particular things differently. […] probably, um, facial expression would, would show what's coming up in the brain. Um, I guess, yeah, mainly it would be, it would come out through the body in some way. And then, um, if you can speak a language with your vocal cords as humans can do, but no one else can do, as far as we know, then it is more likely to come out that way. But yeah. Also express through the body and the facial expressions and the eyes, I guess. (Michaela)

This account has clear implications for how language teachers teach, provide feedback, and evaluate student progress. If language is a tool for communication, then, arguably, the role of the language teacher is to foster students' abilities to *use* language and to communicate with others. Participants Min, an EAL teacher and student researcher, and Brett, a language teacher and teacher educator specializing in Te Reo Māori, both working in New Zealand, spoke about language as communication in the contexts of language teaching and learning:

> So, my principal in language teaching is, I teach students not to know the language, but to *use* the language. So it goes back to my belief that language is a tool. (emphasis added, Min)

> You know, I'm quite a practical person, language has always been about learning about, learning how to speak another language, so at a practical level it's about gaining knowledge of the structures of the language, but being … traditionally, we've talked about, you know, reading, writing, listening, and speaking and those four modes, but to try and encompass a language, that is, you know, very narrow, and it has to involve more than one person. So, communication is an important, a critical feature of it. (Brett)

Ana, a Spanish language teacher and researcher in Australia, prioritized teaching language learners to become *effective communicators*. This involved explicitly acknowledging language as a tool for communication during interactions with her students – for instance, Ana spoke about encouraging her students to prioritize effective communication over concerns about grammatical correctness. Although

she acknowledged that providing corrective feedback played a necessary part in her teaching, she downplayed the role of grammar in interactions beyond the language classroom:

> This is something that I say to the students. In real life, at the end of the day, if you want to communicate something, you will communicate it. It does, people will understand you if they're willing to open themselves up to understand you, and no one is going to correct your grammar. So sometimes the kind of work that we do in class is, I try and contextualize it as, this is a space where your grammar will be corrected, where you're, where I'm trying to teach you about the language structure and system and so on. But, in reality, if you meet people, that will be out the window, you know, like if they really want to talk to you. (Ana)

3.2 Language as thought

While the above account of language addressed communication *between* people, sharing ideas, and coordinating actions, other participants took a step further back to examine the role of language in developing and/or mediating thought. Here, language was related to the formulation of thought into speech or text, the expression of thought, and the parameters for thought itself. The presence of an interlocutor was not essential for language to occur; rather, it played a critical role within individual cognition.

This account was shared by participants William and James, both of whom were based in New Zealand and had worked as English language teachers, language teacher educators, and researchers at various points in their respective careers. William, who had worked as a teacher educator for many years, described the roles of language in both expressing and mediating thought:

> Language is a tool for the creation and expression of understanding and, and, in Hallidayan terms, of expressing emotions, as well as facts, and it's cognitive and affective. It's a mediating tool for the creation, expression of affective and cognitive domains, means of communication. (William)

William then negated the definition of language as a tool for communication, as he believed that this underplayed its true nature:

> But to say that language is communication, or is a tool of communication, is to underplay its importance in the creation of understanding, not merely the expression of understanding […] Yes, *language as thought*. As the expression of mind and emotion, well, mind embraces emotion. (emphasis added, William)

Developing this account through reference to his own experience, James provided an example of language as thought by discussing the expansion of his own lexicon – and, subsequently, his worldview – when he first read George Orwell:

> When you get a word for something – I think back, way back, when I was about 18, 19, reading George Orwell, you know, one of his essays, and he talked about the difference between nationalism and patriotism. And once you've made that distinction, and sort of given me the two words, you know, then it all made sense to me, and I've never, sort of, forgotten about what that distinction was. So, I think just learning a word, getting something in your lexicon, then enables you to kind of, maybe have more complex thoughts, or something? (James)

William and James' reflections recalled the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis[2] which many language teachers are likely familiar with, concerning the extent to which language systems shape the thoughts, worldviews, and perceptions of those who use them (Kay and Kempton 1984). James' comment, that enhancing one's lexicon enables one to have 'more complex thoughts' – not simply to express or articulate these thoughts – suggests some alignment with this hypothesis. William's comments about 'language as thought' also aligned with this but took one step further to address the point at which meaning, or understanding, is created.

3.3 Language as culture

The ontology of *language as culture* did not separate language and culture into two differentiated entities. However, it did constitute two facets. The first positioned language as reflecting and channeling culture. The second extended beyond this, positioning language as itself a form of culture. The distinction between these accounts was subtle, but it is instantiated in the participants' reflections included below.

Brett and Michaela discussed culture as patterns of behavior that wrap around a language system. The system could be broken down and taught without specific reference to culture, although participants reflected that this would not be an effective way to prepare learners for interaction. Ultimately, learners needed to understand *how* to use the language system within interactions, which meant that cultural practices needed to be included in language teaching. As an example of this, Brett provided the following explanation:

> Language is not just about the structures we use. It's about how we are communicating ideas with one another, then it also has impact on culture. Because how you communicate is culturally driven, culturally influenced. You know, if you say the wrong thing to the wrong person in the wrong way, or you try and say something and you say it in the wrong way, then you could get into real trouble. *[laughs]* (Brett)

2 Simply explained, the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis claims that a person's language – including the grammatical and verbal structures that they have access to – determines or influences how they perceive the world.

Michaela also saw culture as very important to how language is conceptualized. In relation to language teaching, she discussed cultural practices as key to fostering students' capacities to interact with others. However, she also acknowledged the difficulty of associating language with culture for global languages, such as English, which she taught as an additional language in New Zealand:

> To teach a language is to basically break something very complex down into small learnable chunks and then make sure that the chunks somehow make sense together. And then, um, I didn't specify English here, but I said to teach a specific language, it also often means you are using it to teach a particular culture or even an aspect of a culture. So, I guess that would apply to English as well, where we're teaching them somehow the ways that, um, that English speaking countries, obviously they all have very different cultures, um, that, that we, um, that we interact with other people who speak the same language, I guess. (Michaela)

Other participants, however, held a more 'integrated' approach to language and culture, questioning whether it was possible to separate them or teach each in isolation. Luong, an English teacher and PhD candidate in New Zealand, did not consider it possible to study language and culture separately from one another, as they are 'two sides in a coin'. She explained that:

> […] language and culture is [sic] interrelated, and can't be, I mean, separated, because they, I think language and culture are two sides in a coin. And very complementary roles. So, when you study a language, that means you study, you understand about the culture of a country and the ways people speak, also express their culture as well. (Luong)

Luong discussed cultures in a pragmatic sense, as pertaining to groups of people and mediating their communicative practices: she referenced 'the culture of a country and the ways people speak'.

Other participants took a more expansive view of culture. Sandrine, a French and intercultural communication teacher and researcher in Australia, explicitly linked the development of language systems with culture – for Sandrine, language *is* culture, and vice versa:

> … language is alive, language moves with changes within society, and culture. So definitely, that's something I'm forever interested in and still learning about it, you know, the development of, the historical development of French and etymology, you know, like, [the students] love it, when I show them that, you know, some simple example. But to get them to think about how language works, it's like, that's part of the, you know, when I, when I call myself a language and culture educator. It's very much that, I didn't call myself that when I started. (Sandrine)

Like Sandrine, Teresa also drew on the evolution of language through the dynamics of culture:

> So, we have mathematical languages and algorithms could be also known as, you know, the morse code or any type of code, but strictly speaking about verbal languages, written languages um, to me they are like organisms, I mean they are they are not fixed, they are not fixed codes, they are alive *they are changing they are dynamic*. So, in a couple of generations you will see that there is a change in certain expressions. So, the etymology of words tells you the origin, as you the perception of people back then centuries ago, so how the world changed through time and the meanings maybe the same word but different meanings. So that tells you that *it's like an organism, alive* … (emphasis added, Teresa)

Teresa also saw the meanings embedded in historical texts as trapped in time, functioning to provide access to 'layers of information' and 'dimensions' that are not present in the ways language is contemporarily used:

> When you go back to, I don't know, 1,000 years and start reading Latin texts, you can see also another perception through the same words maybe, there is this … And you know what they meant these words which we don't mean anymore, so it gives us lots of dimensions you know, layers of information in the same word that we used today but it wasn't used like that centuries ago, so yeah, it's quite complex. (Teresa)

John, an EAL lecturer, teacher educator, and researcher in Australia, separated language from any particular group or set of cultural practices. Rather, he defined language as a human universal necessary for functioning socially, and for existing in the world:

> I think *language is something that we live and breathe with*, and it's kind of as essential for functioning in the world as breathing and eating in many ways. Um, we can't exist socially without it. Um, you know, there are cases of people that have been language starved, and they never produce language and, famous cases there. Um, but it's, yeah, it's essential for our functioning in the world. It's, uh, it's not just essential. It's a source of, uh, of enjoyment, of expression, of enabling, uh, contact with other people with different worldviews, from different backgrounds and so on. Um, and it's something that enables the cohesion of societies in general. (emphasis added, John)

3.4 Language as system

Language was also cast as a system, characterized by a specific architecture. Some participants defined the system as *cultural* and developed over time through interactions, whereas others understood it to be *natural* – i.e., acquired through inherited evolutionary processes. In both views, it comprised integrated parts and was organized by a particular structure.

To provide an example of a cultural view of the language system, Ana emphasized the process of creating systems of communication, around which rules were then formalized: 'at the end of the day, the bottom line is that it is created, it is a creation, as a system of communication […] then people started to create rules around it and to find explanations and, and create prescriptive rules about it'.

Similarly, Sandrine emphasized the *use* of language, as encapsulated in both forms and norms. She compared language to a human body, which has a skeleton as its basic structure, over which other layers are found:

> So, to me language, it's both forms, norms, and we'll probably come back to that, and in the context of teaching language, it's definitely skills, there's an element of that. That language is also use. So, it's also discourse. So, I see really two sides, you know, when I talk about this to students, so the people I, I think of language, if you compare it, to use a metaphor, like a human body, you've got the skeleton. And you could say, that's the basic structure. And I know there's variation within that and etcetera, but then you have the flesh under the use of the whole body. And so definitely norms and structure and use. (Sandrine)

James' account took a more computational approach. He did not explicitly locate the language system as a cultural or social creation, but he did refer to a 'cognitive machinery', or internal language, to which humans have access, and which is divided into different aspects of language (lexicon, pronunciation, etc.). He referred to Chomsky's work in elucidating his account:

> You've got that internal language where it's kind of a computational system, you know, sort of organizing hierarchy or kind of the grammatical kind of side of it. So [Chomsky] is looking at language in that way. And I get that, and I kind of go along with it, that there is that kind of computational system with those interfaces, with the lexicon and the pronunciation to the systems, and all that kind of stuff, and the other sort of thought systems, so you can see it in that real narrow view. That's what, that sort of language, he talks about an organ or something for language? Yeah, so the cognitive machinery or something, that real narrow view. Yes. And I kind of I get that as well. I kind of think, you know, it's probably right. (James)

James referred to this as a 'narrow view' of language, although he nonetheless noted that 'it's probably right'. Similarly, Amanda hinted towards what she perceived to be tension in language studies insofar as understanding language as a system may be overlooked or cast aside in favor of other approaches. While she understood language as 'more than linguistics', she nonetheless included the notion of language as a system in her account:

> […] in my research, at least, although I understand that language is more than linguistics, I'm still interested in looking at that. And I don't think that they should be completely cast aside, because I think certainly with some of the theoretical frameworks that are out there is such a harsh turn away from it, that that you almost end up not looking at that. (Amanda)

3.5 Languaging as practice

A significant amount of theoretical and empirical work in applied linguistics provides an account of language as action and practice, unrestricted by the separation of language

codes; that is, of language in verb form – as languag*ing* – and based within linguistic repertoires developed by individuals (Becker 1991; Bloome and Beauchemin 2016; Lewis et al. 2012; Li 2018; Thibault 2011). This account was also shared by some of the participants.

Min, who had also positioned language as a tool for communication, discussed the notions of plurilingualism and of combining languages when asked how she identified herself as a language user:

> So, I used to call myself, or know myself, as multilingual. That was until I came to this term, plurilingualism. Yep. So, I'll call myself plurilingualist, something like that. If that makes sense. Because multilingual to my understanding is about two or three languages coexisting with each other. So, you are very well-versed or adept at several languages. But for me, my case, because I grew up in such a multicultural country and I grew up with so many languages, I call them, I call myself plurilingualist, because those languages seem, just seem to merge. They just seem to come together. And so sometimes they're combined, the sentence structures or the words, the vocab […] (Min)

Min's notion of languages *seeming to merge* captures the translanguaging notion of language users drawing on their repertoires expansively to make meaning, rather than bracketing languages off as discrete entities (Otheguy et al. 2015).

Amanda associated languaging with more than 'linguistic resources', broadening it out to include other forms of data when analyzing communication. She reflected on this in the context of a project she was undertaking at the time of the interview:

> I do think we need to continue looking beyond that. So at least in my research, I'm looking for other things in the data. I'm looking for affect and emotion. So, I've got things in there, like hesitation, and I'm considering how agency is impacted. And if I see that all as part of the, I suppose *languaging process*. So that's the term I use, I don't even think I use language […] So if you look at it like that, in my research, that means I can look at all different types of data. (emphasis added, Amanda)

Finally, William emphasized the practice of co-constructing meaning as core to languaging: 'because the creation of meaning is a matter of co-construction. I mean, from a, from a very, relatively early age, I realized that people share ideas and create ideas. Um, so whether I'm teaching a language or teaching people how to teach language, I believe it's important for people to work together, to share understanding'. From this perspective, languaging is a practice which always involves sharing and collaboration; for William, these aspects are important parts of language education.

4 Discussion: language ontologies and implications for teaching and learning

In this section, we summarize the ontological accounts of language(s)/languaging provided by the participants (see Table 1, below). As stated earlier, these are not

Table 1: Ontologies of language(s)/languaging.

Account of language/language ontology	Language as a tool for communication	Language as thought	Language as culture	Language as system	Languaging as practice
Main attributes and characteristics	– Language as functional: used to coordinate elements, to accomplish actions to build relationships – Language as fundamental in human social behavior – Language is not restricted to spoken and written linguistic systems – This account prioritizes communication *between* people	– Language as developing and/or mediating *thought* – Language as critical to *individual cognition* – Language as intricately related to *worldview*	– Language as reflecting and channeling aspects of culture – Language *as a form of culture itself* – Language as a human universal, fundamental to the human experience	– Language as comprised of rules, formalized *a posteriori* – Language as comprised of different structures and layers – Language as cognitive machinery, comprised of multiple elements	– Language as an action and practice, unrestricted by the separation of language codes
Implications for teaching, practices and performances	Language teaching should prepare learners to become *effective communicators.* Successful communication may involve more than written and spoken linguistic systems.	Language teaching should prepare learners to expand their perception and ability *to think* (i.e., through acquired lexicon). There is an appreciation of language within the individual, not just between individuals.	Cultural practices should be included in language teaching. Cultural practices are a key element to foster students' capacities to interact with others.	Attention should be paid to the structure of the language system, as encapsulated in both 'forms and norms'.	Language users *practice* language and merge linguistic repertoires to make meaning, rather than bracketing languages off as discrete entities.

exhaustive accounts of language(s)/languaging, but encapsulate the understandings shared in the interviews. As has been shown by the illustrative excerpts, the terms used by the participants included a range of assumptions, conceptions, definitions, and understandings (as well as phrases such as 'we could consider language as …' and 'language has always been about …').

The table summarizes significant findings, including the (pre)ontological assumptions and characteristics of different language ontologies discussed by the participants, as well as the practices and performances that bring these ontologies into being. These accounts position language(s)/languaging in different ways in relation to the form it takes and its interrelationships with other phenomena such as culture, and they all have implications for language teaching and learning. It is important to note, however, that we base our discussion on the data shared (that is, self-reported) by participants during their interviews, and not on observational data gathered during their teaching. Given the complex relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices, it is unlikely that a one-to-one relationship exists between their accounts of language(s)/languaging and their practices. Furthermore, as we note below, teachers face a range of expectations, practices and understandings which shape the ways in which they might understand and practice language before they ever enter a classroom. Nonetheless, we argue that teachers' understandings are likely to both derive – at least partially – from their experiences and to have an effect on how they negotiate language(s)/languaging as professionals and language users. Additionally, taking into account Blaser's (2013) assertion that stories 'partake in the performance of that which they narrate' (552), it is reasonable to claim that participants' accounts are 'real' in the sense that they participate in the creation of the *worlds* the participants inhabit.

Teachers' pedagogical practices, and their attitudes towards changing, developing or sustaining them, are likely to pivot on what language *is* to them. This includes how they engage with more innovative approaches such as translanguaging or code-meshing (Canagarajah 2011; Lewis et al. 2012; Li 2023), as well as any other approach to teaching language.

To expand on this point, we take the example of the ontology of *language as a tool for communication.* If, as teachers, we understand language to be a tool for communication, then our pedagogical practices might aim towards helping students to become as effective communicators as possible. This may involve engaging with a variety of language registers, variants, dialects, accents, vocabularies, codes, and so on, as long as they are considered useful to the learners we are working with. For instance, when working with learners based in multilingual contexts, teachers may reasonably assume that effective communication draws on many aspects of their communicative repertoires, not necessarily heeding the separation between language codes. There are, of course, further positions that teachers may take

concerning *how* effective communication actually happens; they may prioritize certain aspects of language(s)/languaging over others, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, speaking skills, and so forth. They also may see their learners as operating within particular sociocultural groups and contexts, and tailor their instruction accordingly. Programs which teach language for specific purposes or professional contexts provide an apt example of this.

However, not all elements of language are likely considered to be of equal use to make oneself understood and interpret others' meaning. As illustration, we refer to how participant Ana – who strongly emphasized language as a tool for communication – discussed the learning and teaching of grammatical structures. While Ana saw teaching grammar as in some ways necessary, she also argued that the importance of grammatical correctness could 'go out the window' when students engaged in interactions beyond language classrooms. For Ana, it did not matter so much whether learners' grammar was correct in these situations, as long as they could make themselves understood, and Ana did not see an inevitable relationship between correct grammar and comprehensibility. Other participants in the group – and many teachers beyond this group – may well see this stance as controversial. For instance, if the preservation of a particular form of language is a priority, or even if one understands communication to be contingent on correctness, then a different attitude would likely be held in relation to the role of grammar and a different approach taken to teaching it.

However, Ana's stance becomes very sensible if one steps back from attempting to understand how language educators choose to teach a singularized entity (Language), and instead asks what they are teaching in the first place. In Ana's case, she is teaching communication. We would argue that any assessment of the effectiveness and relevance of language teaching practice firstly needs to take this into account. Discussions about *what* we are teaching should be explicit and allow for serious, possibly irreconcilable, variation: it is not so much what teachers think *about* language, but what they think *is* language.

Secondly, there is a reciprocal dynamic between ontologies of language and the practices and performances associated with them: that is, these elements create and reinforce each other. Practices and performances which privilege students as effective communicators mobilize language as a tool for communication in teaching, likely dissimulating other ontologies of language in the process. The assumption that language is primarily a tool for communication informs the practices which prioritize preparing students as effective communicators, as well as ways in which they are assessed. This can include the ways in which we interact with students, and how we prepare and use curricula, learning materials, textbooks, and assessments. If teachers understand language to be a tool for communication, then language *becomes* this in their teaching. Language ontologies are real insofar as they are

performed and practiced; in this way, none are more or less real than others, and all are equally real as long as they are made to be so. As pointed out above, this does not mean that there is a one-to-one relationship between what participants self-report and what they do; rather, we are stating that the stories they share are *themselves performances*; we cannot look to what participants do without attempting to understand what they think.

Taking this into account, 'effective' practice as a language teacher is clearly not easy to pinpoint. The two reasons for this, we argue, are that 1) there seems to be little agreement on what *language* itself is, and 2) that this lack of agreement is often understated, misunderstood or unrecognized. How are we to construct a shared approach to teaching and assessing, or evaluate approaches as more or less effective, if we do not agree on what it is that we are teaching and assessing? To be clear, we are not suggesting that this as a problem that needs resolution within the profession – we do not see agreement or a universal definition of language as a desirable end-point – but we do wish to explore the complexities at play. Attempting to convince all teachers that language should now be languaging, or that language is actually a tool for communication rather than a cultural artefact, or that grammar matters or does not matter, are not our goals. We are not encouraging all language teachers to understand language in the same way or suggesting that this would be desirable for languages education.

We also see this is more than a deviation of ideological or political viewpoints concerning how language *should* be taught. Language(s)/languaging will likely never be a singular entity. Furthermore, all accounts of language are subject to a vortex of social, political, and cultural factors which may serve to strengthen or counteract them. Numerous policies, practices, and guidelines exist to interpellate what we *can* or *should* teach. Examples include quality assurance frameworks regulating the tertiary education sector, and proficiency frameworks which are used to benchmark language learning progressions (such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the International English Language Testing System). Ontologies of language are therefore likely to shift, evolve, and rub up against one another, in more or less visible ways. We argue that the language ontologies frame allows us to perceive and map these situations with greater clarity, acknowledging in the first instance that we are not necessarily talking about the same thing when we use the word 'language'.

What we have not yet mentioned in this paper are the benefits of bringing languages education and applied linguistics into a closer dialogue with linguistic anthropology and broader discussions of the natures of language. Linguistic anthropologists have done extensive work to uncover and understand what language means and is to diverse groups of people, sometimes under the label of *linguistic natures* (Chernela 2018; Ennis 2020; Hauck 2023; Hauck and Heurich 2018). What

have aimed to turn the lens back onto our own contexts (language education and research at the tertiary level), and to resist applying the language ontologies frame to groups and language practices with which we are not familiar. This connects closely to our initial motivations for exploring language ontologies, where we began thinking about what language *is* or *might be* from both our standpoints as language educators, editors, translators, and researchers. A key part of this project has been to regard language practices as performative actions that influence and generate unique ontologies of language. In other words, the primary objective has been to illustrate that there is no universal understanding of language, even among language experts operating in similar environments and working within the same languages. These multiple, and divergent, language ontologies are apparent not only when comparing global languages to minor ones – often associated with distant geographical or cultural contexts and varying ontological viewpoints – but also extend to the everyday and familiar language practices of the contexts in which we live and work.

5 Conclusions

While language is at the core of the participants' professional roles and practices, it is revealing that an analysis of a small group of language teachers has shown discrete accounts of what language is or might be. It would not be sufficient to label these accounts as 'variations' in defining a singular phenomenon, or as facets of a multi-faceted entity. Rather, we argue that it is more accurate to label these accounts as revealing and creating, from an anthropological and ontological perspective, language(s)/languaging as a multiplicity: that is, it is neither exclusively nor predominantly X, Y, or Z, but rather X *and* Y *and* Z, and so forth. None of these accounts is more or less true or correct, insofar as they all reveal what language *means* to the participants in the study, and how they bring it into being it as users and educators. While we have not involved language learners in the data collection, these ideas apply equally to them, and we would also like to know what the learners think they are doing when they perform language – what is the nature, or shape, of the thing that they have undertaken to learn? Many subsequent questions flow from this: from the pragmatic side which concerns how students might gauge the successes of their language learning and stay motivated, to the more critical side of how the notion of language(s)/languaging intersects with larger projects such as multiculturalism, intercultural competences, global citizenship, post- and decolonial thought, and critical language pedagogies. As Blaser (2016) reflects,

> Sometimes different worldings may coexist – enabling each other or without noticing each other – but at other times they interrupt each other. Not being reducible to each other's terms, when and where worldings interrupt each other, the multiplicity at stake might not be amenable to [singularisation]. (563)

Going forward, we see potential to expand this area of research in several ways. Firstly, we see benefit in mapping observed practices alongside ontological claims; for language teachers, this may look like observing their teaching and analysing the materials and assessment practices they employ, or documenting their interactions with students. Secondly, we propose experimenting with focus groups rather than individual interviews to track how ontological accounts may overlap, diverge and/or converge in discussion. Finally, we would encourage expansion of the cultural and geographical contexts of research beyond Australia and New Zealand, and with teachers of specific languages.

In relation to language ontologies, we would argue that we are in the process of undoing singularisation and *recognising* language as a multiplicity. As we have explained elsewhere, this allows us to step away from "the search for fundamental or universal features inherent to all language practices" (Gurney and Demuro 2022b: 3). It is conceivable that language ontologies perform or function as assemblages, and that any singular ontology is permeated by other ways of *worlding* language(s)/languaging: "Assemblage thinking is applicable to any spatiotemporally located event where language is encountered: it is not restricted to certain instances of language, but rather to all and any of what might be considered 'language data'" (Gurney and Demuro 2022a: 316). Returning to Blaser's (2013) earlier assertion, that reality 'is always in the making through the dynamic relations of hybrid assemblages' (551–552), we would add that language(s)/languages are also always in the making, and that they function *as* and *as components of* these dynamic assemblages. Language-as-assemblage, and language-within-assemblage, are comprised of heterogeneous elements which come together to channel affect, and open up *lines of flight* or impose order (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). In the same way that it is brought into Blaser's (2013) work, we invoke the assemblage as a metaontological assertion – that is, as the substrate on which the participants' ontological accounts are brought together. Assemblages, in turn, are preceded by a plane of immanence – 'upon which everything is given, upon which unformed elements and materials dance [. . .] A fixed plane of life upon which everything stirs, slows down or accelerates' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 255). Fundamentally, we see this as a compelling account of language(s)/languaging, which both allows difference (that language is not the same to all who encounter and practice it) as well as convergence, but which does not require a singular or universalized account of language.

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