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For an international journal in transnational times

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Abstract: Academic journals are a site of tension between the perspective of the transnational and international – between an emphasis on the agency and creativity of linguistic practice that transcends boundaries of nations and languages and a focus on the enduring relations of colonial capitalism that impose bounded and hierarchized order upon our social and linguistic life. Being an international journal in transnational times comes with the challenge of having to facilitate transnational flows of knowledge without reifying the oppressive structure of the political economy of knowledge production. The *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*'s response to this challenge may lie in its commitment to solidarity and collaboration, where it serves as a ground for resisting the pressures of academic capitalism and for collectively seeking an agenda for research which dismantle hierarchies and boundaries that sustain and rationalize inequalities.

Keywords: academic capitalism; academic journals; *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (IJSLS); knowledge production; transnationalism

While there are many journals that have “international” in their title, I always felt that the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (IJSLS) most authentically lives up to the meaning of the word. The diversity of its contributors, many from outside of the academic metropole in Europe and North America, as well as its coverage of societies rarely reported on in other journals, strongly indicated the journal’s truly international vision. Reflecting the commitment of the journal’s founding editor, Joshua Fishman, to the diversity and vitality of language communities worldwide, IJSLS thus has been a genuinely international journal, embracing seriously the varying social conditions, realities, and experiences of language users across all corners of the world.

The notion of international, however, is increasingly troubled today. In literal meaning and practice, the term presupposes multiple national spaces and their inter-connections as distinct entities. In other words, the international is a world of

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multiple nations, whose diversity is conceivable in terms of numerical manyness of otherwise homogeneous spaces. Globalization has brought significant challenges to this idea. Changing conditions of the political economy (the shifting intersection of power and economic processes, by which capital seeks to more aggressively expand across national borders in pursuit of profit) and technological advancement (innovations in information communication technology) greatly facilitate the flow of people, ideas, and products across national borders, raising questions about the notion of self-contained, internally homogeneous national spaces and their neatly defined borders.

In research on language, such challenges have been acknowledged through what we may call a “transnational” perspective – a view that social life and linguistic practice must be characterized by traversing and transcending of borders. This view focuses on complex patterns of multilingualism that arise from increasing mobility of speakers across national boundaries, on linguistic hybridity and creativity in digitally mediated communication, and on the way speakers freely mesh resources from multiple languages without concerns about their boundaries. By emphasizing the porosity of borders and speakers’ agency in negotiating them, the transnational perspective presents itself as a critical viewpoint on the international, drawing our attention to cracks in the oppressive authority of standard languages represented by rigid national boundaries. In doing so, it seeks to undo the unequal relationships between language varieties reproduced by hierarchical relations across and within national borders.

But the term international is by no means outdated. Even in today’s globalized world, national borders still have undeniable material reality, and rigid stratification between languages continues to disenfranchise users of certain varieties. In this sense, the notion of the international serves as a relevant reminder for the enduring legacies of colonial capitalism, which thrive on the creation and maintenance of boundaries that exclude. The perspective of the transnational is thus often questioned for its naivete and potential collusion with power. In particular, concepts like superdiversity and translanguaging, as prominent keywords for the transnational perspective, have been criticized for reflecting Eurocentric anxieties against diversity, privileging neoliberal elites and their subjectivities, and failing to properly account for persisting conditions of political economic inequality (Kubota 2016; Ndhlovu 2016; Pavlenko 2018, among others).

The perspectives of the international and the transnational, however, are not necessarily competing paradigms to choose from. It is more productive to consider them as highlighting different axes that make up the tension in the way language users are positioned in global space. They must be understood in relation to each other, in the same way structure and agency serve as dialogically co-constituting conditions of society. On the one hand, the agentive creativity of language users in

negotiating ideologically established social difference lies at the very foundation of linguistic practice; but on the other hand, such agency is also what performatively erects boundaries of exclusion and reproduces networks of social power.

It is for this reason that I hope that IJSL can ask hard questions about what it means to be an international journal in an academic climate where, arguably, a heavier spotlight is put on the transnational. Academia today is a highly transnational field. Scholars routinely interact and collaborate on a global scale. Scholars themselves are highly mobile, frequently moving between countries for training, fieldwork, employment, and networking. All this is further facilitated by the mediation of digital communication technology, which the Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated. Yet, it is also clear that the bounded, hierarchical organization of the international still constrains such transnational connections. Academic research is frequently organized in terms of national frameworks, due not only to the state-centric nature of research institutions and funding systems, but also to formation of research communities along ideological fault lines of language. Such national research communities are also hierarchically ordered. For instance, global rankings of institutions or key roles in international academic organizations typically privilege those in the economically advanced West, Anglophone countries in particular.

Academic journals, as a crucial element of this academic field, are in themselves a site of tension between the transnational and international. Large part of global exchange of knowledge takes place through pages of journals, particularly as digital publishing has become the norm. Major journals also actively seek to “internationalize”, soliciting submissions and recruiting editorial board members from more diverse range of countries. But such efforts at internationalization are commonly guided by the international perspective that highlights national borders, for instance in the way they focus on achieving diversity in terms of the contributors’ country of origin. And academic journals serve as a key force in reproducing the hierarchical ordering of national languages, as the vast majority of influential international journals are in English, and if not, in dominant European languages.

However, this tension is most prominent in the role that internationalization of journals plays in academic capitalism, where, under the influence of neoliberalism, education and research increasingly become reframed as fields for profit seeking, and researchers and academic institutions are pressed to brand themselves as entrepreneurs of knowledge. In this process, academic journals, as the primary channel through which knowledge-as-commodity is circulated, gain greater power and seek to enhance that power by extending their reach in the market. The global players in the academic journal publication market, consisting of a small number of influential publishing houses, largely represent the interests of capital rooted in Western national economies. Nevertheless, they welcome

internationalization as a strategy for enhancing the prestige and market reach of their journals. Internationalization of journals is attractive to capital because it boosts quantitative measures of their value, including impact factors and journal rankings, and in turn the global marketability of journals as commodities. Given that such quantitative indices form a foundational element of how research is evaluated by the complex of global higher education institutions, academic publishing industry, and dominant research funding agencies, the recent rise of alternative platforms, such as online research repositories or open-access publishing, does little to disrupt this valorization of internationalization.

One major challenge for an international journal in transnational times is, then, how to facilitate the transnational flow and exchange of knowledge, while resisting the exploitative hierarchies and commodifications of that knowledge? Internationalization of academic journals, while constrained by colonial regimes of inequality and capitalist profit-seeking, may also provide opportunities, for we, as scholars who constitute the very life stream of journals as authors, readers, editors, and reviewers, can use that space to collectively redefine what counts as valuable research, whose voices need to be heard more, and how to facilitate the circulation of knowledge without reifying structures of inequality. Indeed, many scholars and researchers are already actively involved in such work. For instance, some actively critique the coloniality of knowledge production underlying the politics of citation (Canagarajah 1996; Kubota 2020; Liddicoat 2016; Lillis et al. 2010; McElhinny et al. 2003; Piller 2016) and others, through their service as journal editors, strive to create more globally equitable forums for knowledge exchange – the editorial team for IJSL being a case in point.

Yet, such efforts lead us to further challenges. For instance, a more fundamental question that calls for further reflection may be: why do we seek transnational exchange of knowledge in the first place? While the value of such exchange may appear self-evident, it is also important to recognize that we need to be wary of how such idealized goals may be appropriated by academic capitalism, given that any exchange of knowledge cannot escape taking place within specific historical, material, and political conditions.

For example, some national research communities in the world, though relatively isolated from the global community of academic research due to institutional, political, and linguistic reasons, may nonetheless be thriving in producing research that is both locally significant and globally relevant, self-sufficiently forming its own field of exchange. In such cases, what can be the reason for trying to reach out to those communities and to bring them into the global sphere of knowledge circulation? Without critical reflection on this question, there is risk that such efforts may provide more benefits to academic institutions and the academic publishing

industry of the economically advanced West rather than those communities, as academic circles housed in those institutions accumulate greater symbolic power through the act of canonization they bestow upon non-center research communities, and the journals that serve as the channels for such acts enhance their commodity value, drawing greater citation numbers and global circulation (Cusicanqui 2019).

In order to break away from such exploitative structures of academic capitalism, transnational circulation and exchange of academic research should not take place just for its own sake – it must be guided by a concrete sense of urgency that solidarity and collaboration is required to undo the colonial hierarchization and neoliberal appropriation of academic knowledge. Today, capital exerts unprecedented control over the production of scientific knowledge, leading to great precarity of academic labor and commodification of research work. Transnational exchange of knowledge could be reimagined as a space where we contest such control, where we work together across borders to claim our rights as academic workers to jointly develop our own agenda for research – ones that do not speak to the interests of capital, but contribute to the dismantling of hierarchies and boundaries that sustain and rationalize those interests.

The challenges that IJSL faces as an international journal are thus great. However, I also believe that the journal's traditional alliance with small language communities and its commitment to the diverse voices across the world serves as a promising basis for seeking a way forward. I hope the transnational conversations that take place in the pages of IJSL can be a part of our collective undoing of the dominant political economy of knowledge production. Therein lies the potential for connections, collaborations, and convergences in knowledge production that can truly overcome structures of oppression and inequality.

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