Rapid communication

Ria Angelo*

Against the multilingual turn as paradigm replacement: Reconsidering Kubota's charge

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Abstract: In her 2016 paper, entitled, *The Multi-Plural Turn, Post-Colonial Theory and Neoliberal Multiculturalism: Complicities and Implications for Applied Linguistics*, Kubota proposes a more critical look at neoliberal aspects of the multilingual turn in applied linguistics that, in celebrating individual difference, challenge its status as a transformative discourse. In her argument from paradigm replacement, Kubota posits that because the multilingual turn, to some extent, emerges from the principle of individual accountability in a neoliberal political economy, its discourse must be complicit with the aims of a neoliberal agenda. This paper is a reply to some of the issues she raises in that critique. My argument is two-pronged. First, I take issue with the epistemic characterization of individual accountability as the only source of multilingualism within a neoliberal discourse. Second, I challenge her rejection of a democratic cosmopolitanism as a self-determining antidote to the neoliberal ideal (c.f. Calhoun 2002). This paper concludes that an alternate epistemic source of the multilingual turn unites language speakers in more moral and less economic terms, thereby destabilizing the argument from paradigm replacement.

Paradigms are epistemic affairs, and this is what makes them attractive. By epistemic affairs I mean how we justify what we know, and by paradigms, I mean entire knowledge frameworks that allow us to do so. Paradigms, thus, are slippery concepts and unless they are intimately related to disciplinary and academic practices, it is difficult to pinpoint what it is exactly that they do. For my purposes here, therefore, it is worth beginning by characterizing the notion of paradigm within applied linguistics, which for many readers will constitute a familiar review. Briefly, the production of knowledge in applied linguistics is very much based, historically, on a series of epistemic norms whose parameters have for a long time been delimited by the tenets and methods of positivism as the appropriate knowledge framework for explaining language learning and use (Block 1996 cited in Davies 1999; Dean 1994 cited in Pennycook 2001). This makes us one with the rest of the social sciences whose history of 'physics envy' (Lather 2004) meant jettisoning explanations that were outside the realm of the lower-level sciences (See Pascale 2010 and Pennycook 2001). The Napoleonic complex, however, of applied linguistics has recently been unmasked to reveal that if it is, after all, the social world we wish to explain (and not inanimate objects that are independent of social context), then a rejection of 'linguistics applied' in favour of an 'applied linguistics' is necessary to turn *a priori* linguistic categories and structures on their head – making them products not of preconceived cognitive processes (Widdowson 2001), but of the material and discursive social world (Lantolf and Thorne 2007). Using the social realm as a starting point to the study of language learning and use has thus refocused our gaze toward politically inflected knowledge frameworks and their corollary discourses (Pennycook 1989, 1990, 2001).

It is in this context that I base my reply to Kubota. Specifically, following a 'critical' or political turn in applied linguistics, theorists such as Pennycook (2001), Canagarajah (2013, 2017), Ortega (2014), May (2014) and Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) reject the 'monolingual bias' favouring the invariant standard code of the

* **Corresponding author: Ria Angelo,** Department of Education, University of Bath, Bath, BA2 7AY, United Kingdom, e-mail: era27@bath.ac.uk

native-speaker standard – arguing instead in favour of the communicative interactions of multilinguals as a hybrid and unpredictable mix of languages that resist *a priori* language structures.

Through this lens, Kubota argues that the hybrid discourse of a multilingual turn cannot serve as a transformative discourse because it simply replaces one paradigm with another. The crux of the argument emerges from the conditional which states that if multilingualism arises from transnational mobility for economic gain, the context of our current political economy, then it must also derive from neoliberalism's principle of individual accountability rather than the shared goals of non-dominant social groups (Kubota 2016: 486).

Specifically, Kubota (2016: 475) argues that 'in bolstering multilingual discourse, the multi-plural approaches lose a transformative edge' once we understand that it serves as a universalizing blanket over difference, as an essential skill in a globalized market. Her main concern seems to be that the focus on neoliberal linguistic plurilingualism highlights individual hybridity over 'group solidarity' which gives rise to 'colour-blindness' and a 'kind of diversity' that favours a rising middle class over a working class with access to less resources (Kubota 2016: 488). In this vein, her critique rightly suggests a lack of 'critical awareness of power relations' that underlie the potential of multilingualism as counter-hegemonic (Kubota 2016: 486). Though I am sympathetic to her view, there are two clarificatory points I wish to make that I think might prove beneficial to the discussion surrounding the critical potential of hybridity in the current applied linguistic context.

First, Kubota draws on the work of Flores (2013) who deploys a critical analysis of language policy to demonstrate that the Council of Europe 'supports learning across borders (via various linguistic repertoires), respect for linguistic diversity, language rights, freedom of expression and democratic citizenship' (Kubota 2016: 486 paraphrasing Flores). She says, 'this aligns with the neoliberal emphases on the development of individual competencies in service of economic growth' (Kubota 2016: 486). In other words, to accept the multilingual turn as a neoliberal discourse is essentially to replace one neoliberal paradigm (monolingualism) with another (multilingualism). This alleged replacement, however, I would argue, is epistemically unwarranted, downplaying its moral potential and therefore cannot be sustained for the reasons I outline below.

That is, in order to be able to say that the multilingual turn replaces monolingualism as a neoliberal enterprising ideal, we must commit to positivism as its source. For instance, while positivism accounts for *a priori* monolingual language standards, it cannot fully account for the multilingualism of a multilingual turn. This is because as I indicated above, the multilingual turn rejects the linguistic effects of neoliberalism, or the denationalization of state based on meritocracy or equal competition (Brown and Lauder 2006). It does so by rejecting monolingual or standard language practices and the subordination of alternate language forms in the name of economic gain (Grin 2001 cited in Cameron 2012: 354). In this sense, multilingualism as a transformative discourse, in the first instance, dissolves a positivist dichotomy between native speaker (NS) and non-native-speaker (NNS) identity categories that view the latter as a 'defective' communicator, 'limited by an underdeveloped communicative competence' (Firth and Wagner 2007: 285). Both Flores and Kubota, however, appear to conflate plurilingualism, or the need for 'fluid language practices that change throughout one's lifetime' (Flores 2013: 512) with neoliberalism's ideal for the 'enterprising self,' which Flores (2013: 514) qualifies as 'ever-changing lifelong learners with the ability to collaborate in culturally competent ways.' In other words, 'ever-changing lifelong learners' as a characteristic aspect of the 'enterprising self' requires epistemic qualification in neoliberal terms, which neither Kubota nor Flores provide.

Neoliberalism, for instance, is unequivocally defined by its meritocratic ideal, which posits, as mentioned, equal opportunity irrespective of sociocultural and geographical background. In neoliberal terms, therefore, equal opportunity serves as the 'axis of achievement' for economic efficiency or competitiveness (Parsons 1959 cited in Brown 1995: 30), which effectively places objective criteria on individuals that mirror the expectations and qualities required for effective future employment (i.e. 'productive' potential) (Brown et al. 2012: 23). This axiom of standardization is what spawns what we now call language commodification (LC) (Block 2019; Cameron 2012), or otherwise, the hegemonic language practices (Phillipson 2008 cited in Kubota 2016: 486) and pedagogical tenets of monolingualism to which Kubota refers (See Cummins 2007

cited in Kubota 2016: 476). This is because meritocracy legitimizes a monolingual language standard in positing equal access and opportunity through its universalizing axiom (Angelo 2020). Alas, it is from this discursive and epistemic sharpening I would argue that we get the 'myth of meritocracy,' which challenges the explanatory reach of equal opportunity without access to symbolic and economic resources required to compete in an unregulated market (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Brown and Lauder 2006).

This means that in line with meritocracy, language learning also corroborates the meritocratic myth, which strips the ideology down to competition between those able to master a given language (with of course, the right resources). In this context, it is easier to understand the discursive dichotomy Kubota (2016: 486) invokes in suggesting a duality of neoliberal pluralism on the one hand and commodification on the other. Though she is right to take issue with 'lifelong learning of communications skills to be developed as an individual responsibility' (Kubota 2016: 486), this is only a partial and indirect characterization of multilingualism and its relation to neoliberalism. What I would like to suggest here is that once we understand the epistemic and discursive assumptions meritocracy imposes on learners to develop a given (language) skill for economic gain, we can, at least in part, reject the argument from paradigm replacement. This is because while LC emerges as a direct result of the neoliberal ideal of equal opportunity (and hence individual accountability), the multilingual turn emerges as a more indirect result of this ideal.

Specifically, as I have argued elsewhere (Angelo 2020), on the one hand, the commodification of language equates the acquisition of a second or foreign language with economic gain in transnational corporations such as Google, Airbus and Citigroup (See Grin cited in Shroedler 2017: 10). On the other hand, transnational workers and their families mix and switch languages – still for economic gain – however this occurs as a more indirect result of the neoliberal meritocratic ideal that doesn't have the same caché in cafés, malls and marketplaces where mixing and switching predominantly take place (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Accepting this tenet, however, requires accepting that the multilingual turn emerges by consequence, as a more direct result of another force, one which is bottom–up and not top–down, but that shares the premise of the (inevitable) denationalization of state (See Calhoun 2002: 885).

Indeed, the crux of the argument from paradigm replacement is simultaneously dependent on the rejection of what Calhoun (2002) calls democratic cosmopolitanism (DC) as a self-determining antidote to the meritocratic discourse of LC. This is where Kubota's worry emerges when she states that (2014: 479) the (top–down) source of 'difference-blindness' to which the multilingual turn gives rise 'does not necessarily take into account how racial and other relations of power might affect the ways people use, learn and teach language.' Here the meritocratic principle of equal opportunity appears in the requirement for lifelong learning of languages as an individual responsibility. While I do not contest that shining an instrumentalist light on the multilingual turn might cast its discourse in meritocratic terms (which it does but in an indirect sense, as I indicate above), it is more valuable, I would argue, to examine the possibility of an alternate, epistemic source of multilingualism able to highlight alternate forms of social binding that vary morally – from more economically, or instrumentally oriented, to more intrinsically and 'inherently' bound (Calhoun 2002: 886). This leads to my second point here.

Kubota, for instance, takes into account the democratic approach of cosmopolitanism by citing Calhoun (2002: 887 cited in Kubota 2016: 488), who states that 'cosmopolitanism is neither responsible for capitalism [...] nor an adequate defense of it.' Nonetheless, a sharper distinction, I would argue, between democratic and economic forms of cosmopolitanism can illuminate the statement that 'the ideal neoliberal subject is cosmopolitan' (Kubota 2016: 487). Understood as such, we might better be able to 'temper' (Kubota 2016: 488) new hybrid language practices that consider race, class, gender and other forms of bottom–up social binding that turns neoliberal individuality on its head in favour of the shared discourses of a wide range of social groups.

My argument here is that if we consider, for instance, that (capitalist) neoliberalism and DC are two ends of a spectrum that determine a moral stance, or what we owe each other in a globalized society, then we can begin to accept that multilingualism operates out of another political context that comes from below rather than on top. This makes its source very different from that of LC. Through this lens, in problematizing the source of social unity as varying points on the cosmopolitan continuum (and as the fundamental question of politics for that matter), we see that DC amounts to more than the abstract 'common

denominators' of global citizenship, institutional affiliation and legal status (Calhoun 2002: 878). Calhoun (2002: 888), for instance, concedes, 'But cosmopolitanism without the strengthening of a local democracy is bound to be a very elite affair.' Here, we begin to witness a shift from political belonging and hence categorical unity that is imposed, to political belonging that is self-determined. In discursive terms, this constitutes the difference between, on the one hand, top–down NS/NNS categories of competence, and on the other, more messy, subaltern ways of doing language that can bring social unity from below.

Kubota, however, assumes a cognitivist/positivist position in her criticism, thereby weakening the argument from paradigm replacement. Calhoun (2002: 893), for instance, ends by encouraging us to resist conceptualizing DC forms of social binding in terms of 'rational-discourse' because they are theorized from above. Indeed, this is precisely where Kubota goes wrong in her skepticism of multilingualism as a transformative discourse. Here, she argues by example that in higher education research, multilingualism has an exchange value that eager, albeit morally inclined academics wish to cash in on (Kubota 2016: 489–90). Again, this constitutes a top–down social binding which in maintaining a rationalist, *a priori* facet cannot replace an essential aspect of transformation: praxis. For a democratic discourse such as multilingualism to flourish, 'it must grow out of the life-world; it must empower people not in the abstract, but in the actual conditions of their lives.' (Calhoun 2002: 875).

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