

## (Critical) Applied Linguistics and the intersection between language research and social justice

Research Methodology in European Modern Languages and Literatures

### **Session V**

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## Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL)

Field of inquiry and practice that **brings a critical focus to applied linguistic work.**

A central goal is to CONNECT questions of...

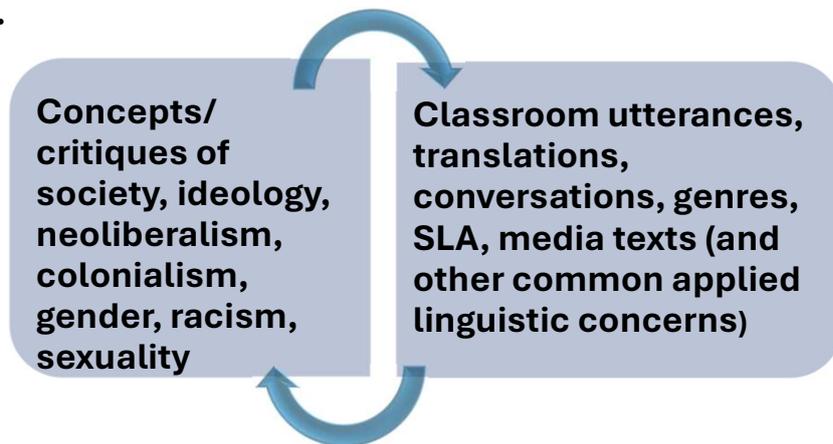
- **domination** (contingent and contextual effects of power)
- **disparity** (inequitable access to material and cultural goods)
- **discrimination** (ideological and discursive frames of exclusion)
- **difference** (constructions and realities of social and cultural distinction)
- **desire** (operations of ideology, agency, identity, and transformation)

to **applied linguistic** concerns.

(Pennycook, 2021)

## Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL)

Key challenge for CAL is to find ways of understanding RELATIONS between...



(Pennycook, 2021)

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## Domains of inquiry (examples)

- language and migration
- workplace discrimination
- anti-racist education
- language revival

**Insistence that ALL DOMAINS OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS (classroom analysis, language testing, sign language interpreting, language and the law etc.) need to take into account the inequitable operations of the social world, and to have the theoretical and practical tools to do so effectively.**

(Pennycook, 2021)

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According to Pennycook (2021), CAL aims not only to describe inequality but to change it through **research, teaching, and activism.**

## Critical Applied Linguistics (CAL)

**How power, inequality, and ideology are operationalized methodologically??**

CAL is less a single method than a *critical stance enacted through methods.*

## Example 1/5

### ***Paths to Post-Nationalism: A Critical Ethnography of Language and Identity* (Heller, 2011)**

Abstract: “Nationalism has informed all our ideas about language, culture, identity, nation, and state. [...] Language, culture, and identity are commodified; communication takes on a central role as work process and work product in the new economy; multilingualism becomes a salient element of managing the mobility of people, ideas, and goods, and, indeed, of their very value. [...] Examining sociolinguistic practices in workplaces, schools, community associations, NGOs, state agencies, and sites of tourism and performance across francophone North America and Europe, [the author] shows how the tensions of late modernity produce competing visions of social organization and competing sources of legitimacy in attempts to reimagine—or resist reimagining—who we are.”

- **Multilingualism is valued selectively: profitable diversity is rewarded, while (unmarketable) difference is stigmatized.**

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199746866.001.0001>

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## Example 2/5

### ***Identity and Language Learning* (Norton, 2013) [2<sup>nd</sup> edition]**

About the book: “draws on a longitudinal case study of immigrant women in Canada to develop new ideas about identity, investment, and imagined communities in the field of language learning and teaching. Bonny Norton demonstrates that a poststructuralist conception of identity as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change across time and place is highly productive for understanding language learning. [...] [It] addresses the following central questions:

- Under what conditions do language learners speak, listen, read and write?
- How are relations of power implicated in the negotiation of identity?
- How can teachers address the investments and imagined identities of learners?”
- **SLA theories must incorporate social power, or they misdiagnose learners’ difficulties.**
- **Social change through the integration of theory, research, and practice.**

<https://zenodo.org/records/11561780>

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## Example 3/5

### ***Language Policy: Hidden Agendas and New Approaches (Shohamy, 2006)***

Abstract: “Policies concerning language use are increasingly tested in an age of frequent migration and cultural synthesis. With conflicting factors and changing political climates influencing the policy-makers, Elana Shohamy considers the effects that these policies have on the real people involved. Using examples from the US and UK, she shows **how language policies are promoted and imposed, overtly and covertly**, across different countries and in different contexts.”

- **Arguments supporting a more democratic and open approach to language policy and planning**
- **Approaches (resistance) to preventing language attrition and ensuring the protection of linguistic rights at both group and individual levels.**

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203387962>

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## Example 4/5

### ***The Cultural Politics of English as an International Language (Pennycook, 1994, 2017)***

Abstract: “(...) explores the globalization of English by examining its colonial origins, its connections to linguistics and applied linguistics, and its relationships to the global spread of teaching practices”.

Key topics include: international politics, colonial history, critical pedagogy.

“(...) idea that English can never be removed from the social, cultural, economic or political contexts in which it is used.”

- **English does not simply spread; it is recontextualized and contested**
- **ELT from development aid to global commodity**
- **Towards a critical pedagogy for teaching English as a wordly language**

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315225593>

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## Example 5/5

### ***Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* (Canagarajah, 1999)**

About the book: “describes the creative strategies employed by teachers and students in periphery communities in order to use the English language in a manner that suits their needs while subtly resisting the linguistic imperialism that many scholars have identified as the consequence of the global ELT enterprise. After developing trends and ideas from those oppositional strategies, the book goes on to outline elements of a critical pedagogy suitable for ELT in formerly colonized communities.”

- **It argues for pedagogical models that recognize local agency and hybrid language practices.**
- **For teachers and applied linguists wishing to understand the ideological challenges in the periphery, and for curriculum planners and policy makers exploring pedagogical alternatives.**

[https://books.google.es/books/about/Resisting\\_Linguistic\\_Imperialism\\_in\\_Engl.html?id=8RQ\\_v9GoHsYC&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.es/books/about/Resisting_Linguistic_Imperialism_in_Engl.html?id=8RQ_v9GoHsYC&redir_esc=y)

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## What makes these CAL?

Across all these works, CAL is characterized by:

- Explicit engagement with **power, inequality, ideology**
- Attention to **real applied sites** (classrooms, tests, policies, texts)
- A commitment to **social change**, not neutrality

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## How can you intersect those studies with social justice?

## How can you intersect those studies with social justice?

**They try to interrupt reproduction of inequality.**

- Expose **how language practices sustain domination**
- **Challenge ideologies presented as neutral** (or “technical”)
- **Enable agency, resistance, and transformation**
- **Reorient applied linguistics toward ethical accountability**

## CAL studies

- Attempt not merely to *understand language* but *change social conditions*
- Promote identity-affirming pedagogy
- Favor access to speaking rights
- Demonstrate linguistic exclusion through testing and assessment, Delegitimizes the claim that language testing is politically neutral
- Promote inclusive language policies
- Validate resistance; show how agency exists even under structural constraint
- Legitimize hybridity; translanguaging
- Prevent from celebrating multilingualism *uncritically*
- Promote curricula shifts away from colonial norms

## How CAL can produce change

Across these studies, CAL contributes to social justice through interlocking mechanisms:

- **Denaturalization (the familiar becomes political)**
- **Reallocation of responsibility (for structural intervention)**
- **Empowerment and agency (validates marginalized voices)**
- **Activist scholarship (collaboration with communities, design of pedagogical interventions, engage in policy debates)**

## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

Qualitative and critical research orientation encourage a wide range of research approaches as alternate to traditional scientific-empirical approaches. **“But** the modes of reporting research have been left out of consideration.” (p. 214)

**“(...) the ideological nature of research report has been overlooked.” (p. 214)**

## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

**Possible that the genre conventions of research reporting can modify/corrupt/eclipse the reported data.**

“(...) the usual dissonance between what is known from fieldwork and what is constrained to report according to genre conventions can grow intolerable.”

(Marcus; Fischer, 1986, p. 37, as cited in Canagarajah, 2016, p. 215)

## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

The genre that enjoys almost paradigmatic status in scholarly circles (including our own) constitutes the four-part report of introduction, methods, results, and discussion, belonging to the scientific-empirical tradition. [Berkenkotter (1993) has questioned its appropriateness for QUAL studies]

[...]

The passive syntax and impersonal tone, together with the inductive structure, serve to maintain the pretense of objectivity, detachment, and neutrality, suppressing the agency of the researcher.

(p. 215)

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## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

The notion that the text reflects the real world, with the multitude of concrete details photographically depicting the research context, is the mimetic view of art/literature that derives from the 19th-century empirical tradition. This genre is also influenced by the "window pane" theory of language – that is, language as a transparent medium that reveals unproblematically the material world outside.

(pp. 215-216)

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## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

The need for coherence in the report - achieved by the closure, the tight structure, and seamless writing - can hide the false starts, wrong moves, misleading tracks, and interpretive gambles that usually characterize the research process.

(...)

The genre conventions of objectivity and detachment can also function to suppress the mediation of various levels of discourses in the research process - such as the values of the researcher, the values of the research methodology, the values of the discipline, and the values of the academic community concerned.

(p. 216)

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## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

The scope for adequately representing the researched/subjects is similarly limited. Because the subjects exist in the report only through the voice of the researcher, there is a natural tendency for their complexity to be suppressed and their identity to be generalized (or essentialized) to fit the dominant assumptions and theoretical constructs of the researcher and the disciplinary community.

**The power relationships between the researcher and the subjects also get concealed in the objective report.**

(p. 216)

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## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016)

“Minority scholars like bell hooks (1990) have protested against the practice of academic researchers using knowledge of/from subordinate groups for their own intellectual, academic, or professional agendas.” (p. 216)

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The image in Figure 1.1 shows bike bells, still wrapped in their original packing material. The bike bells belonged to the professor who preceded the professor whose successor today is Anne Storch. We inherit things that are put away in little storage rooms next to our offices. These things are not just objects, they are entangled with disciplinary practice, with the complex colonial epistemologies of linguistics. These bike bells were meant for Africa, to pay so-called ‘informants’. Their knowledge was turned into a commodity, to be rewarded with the equivalent of beads and mirrors.

(Deumert & Storch, 2020, p. 7)



Figure 1.1 Bike bells, Cologne 2018

## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016) - Alternatives

### Initial shifts in research writing

[...] the more relaxed use of the first-person pronoun. **But** this perfunctory ‘I-dropping’ (see Raymond, 1993) is too weak a gesture to incorporate the complex splits and shifts in the subject positions of the researcher, characterized by a mixture of divided interests and values influencing the research process. Another rhetorical move has been to open the report with an announcement of the subject positions occupied by the researcher: “I am a white male tenured liberal from the Midwest.”

[...]

**But critical research calls for a more sustained and rigorous exploration of the ways the researcher’s subjectivity influences the research process. Boxing this concern into a single section in a largely detached, univocally authored, realist text is unsatisfactory.**

(p. 217)

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## Critical Research Practice → Critical Research Reporting (Canagarajah, 2016) - Alternatives

For example, Kevin Dwyer’s (1982) *Moroccan Dialogues* attempts to build into the text the complexity of the fieldwork/research situation and the polyphony of voices in the research context to encourage readings from multiple points of view. Through a series of lightly edited interview transcripts, Dwyer dramatizes the exploratory, hypothetical, recursive, cumulative interpretive process of the researcher. Through this mode of presentation, he exposes how the neat linear textualization of ethnography distorts the immediacy of the fieldwork situation and hides the researchers’ shaky control over their understanding of the culture about which they later write with authority. The readers are similarly taken through the process of arriving at a deeper understanding of the new cultural system— while also acquiring an understanding of their own values and predisposition which motivated the partial initial readings. Gesa Kirsch observes that confronted with an informant who was decidedly against her own feminist perspective, she resorted to providing lengthy excerpts from the interview transcripts to voice the other’s opinion, accompanied by her own explanation and theorization (Kirsch & Ritchie, 1995, p. 19).

(p. 217)

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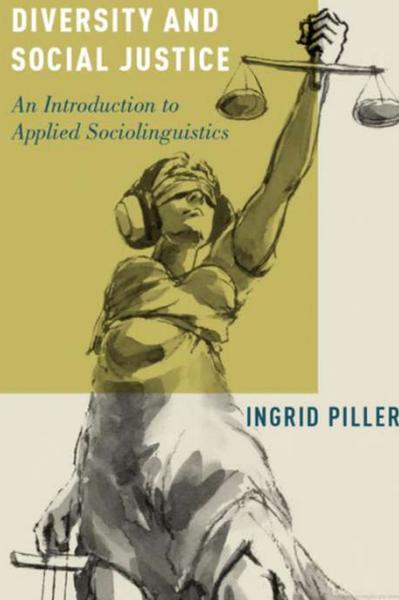
When I refer to a critical linguistics, I mean, first and foremost, a linguistics focused on practical issues. It is not the simple application of theory for practical ends, but thinking about theory itself differently, never losing sight of the fact that our work must have some relevance. Relevance for our lives, for society in general. [...] it is possible to change things, instead of just conforming to them [...] the true critical spirit must turn back, once again, to itself. **It is necessary, in other words, to submit our practices to critical scrutiny.**

(Rajagopalan, 2003, pp. 12-13, *my translation*)

What do the earmuffs mean in the picture?

LINGUISTIC  
DIVERSITY AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE

*An Introduction to  
Applied Sociolinguistics*



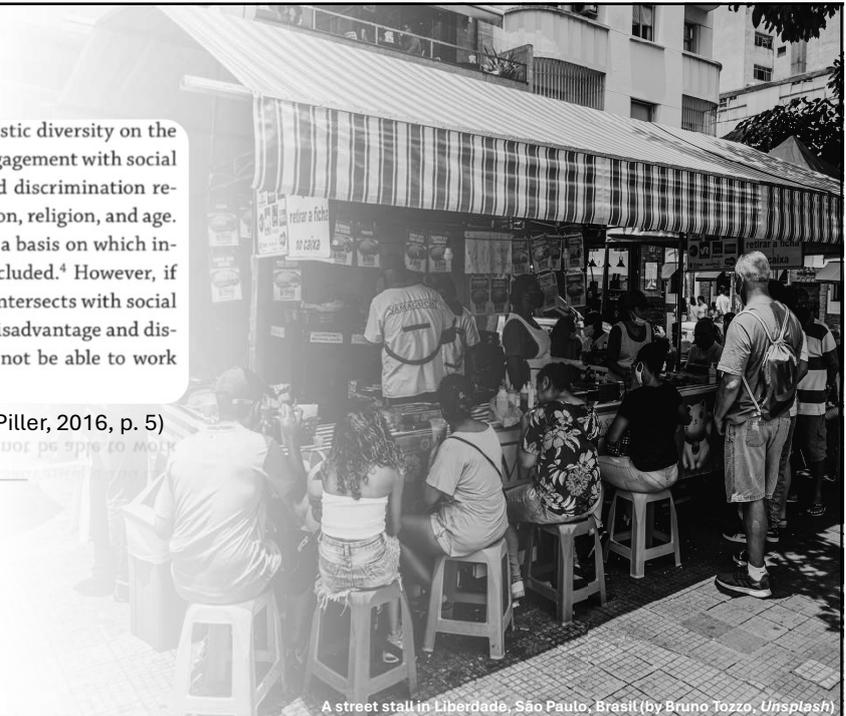
INGRID PILLER

The second aim of this book is to put linguistic diversity on the map of contemporary social justice debates. Engagement with social justice focuses principally on disadvantage and discrimination related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and age. It is extremely rare for 'language' to feature as a basis on which individuals, communities, or nations may be excluded.<sup>4</sup> However, if we do not understand how linguistic diversity intersects with social justice and if we are unable to even recognize disadvantage and discrimination on the basis of language, we will not be able to work toward positive change.

τομὰτὸ βολῆτικὸν κριτικὸν

(Piller, 2016, p. 5)

επιμνηστικὸν οὐτὸν ἐπεὶ τὸν βῆμα τὸν ἰσχυρισμὸν ὅτι οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ δρόμος πρὸς τὴν ἀλλαγὴν



A street stall in Liberdade, São Paulo, Brazil (by Bruno Tozzo, Unsplash)

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