

INTRODUCTION

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As a defining characteristic of what it means to be human, the use of language plays a central role in virtually every form of human activity. From the moment when our first cries, as a newly born child, begin to mimic the melody of the speech around us, we begin an involuntary process in which language progressively ties us into our immediate community and into the wider society. Linked as we are in this way, language functions as a cornerstone in the construction of our identity amongst others and in the relationships we build. It takes a central role in facilitating every enterprise we undertake, alone or together with others, as our language enables the formulation and communication of ideas. It permits us to reflect on our past, analyse our present and plan our future, creating the central thread through our own biographies as we endeavour to make sense of the narratives of our lives. And, beyond the confines of our own personal possibilities, language enables us to take part in the transmission of our own culture, its maintenance, evolution and perhaps eventual demise in the face of rival formulations of ideas.

Given its pivotal role in virtually every action we take, it is perhaps surprising, then, that we could even consider that the study of language would have any boundaries. The notion of *stretching the boundaries*, the subtitle of this collection of papers, may thus sound a somewhat odd idea. Yet, the study of language has traditionally been focussed on language *itself*, its analysis and description, and those broader links which have been formed have most frequently been found as extensions of other disciplines – the psychology of language, for example, is often considered an extension of psychology; the sociology of language, an extension of sociology; and so on. In this sense, then, language studies, as an academic area of interest, may, historically, have imposed boundaries upon itself, perhaps in trying to carve out a discernible space as it competed for academic recognition and status as a *science*—linguistic science—largely leaving the interrelationship of language with other areas of human knowledge for others to elucidate.

Such, however, is not the nature of modern-day language studies. The field is now characterised by an intense cross-fertilisation of ideas, often from distant disciplines. Thus, an area which was once typified by a consensus over its domain of reference is now characterised by numerous, often competing frames, and a fragmentation of what is considered its research focus. Examples abound: the development of computers has brought us ‘computational linguistics’; the study of politics and economics has shaped an emerging field of ‘critical discourse studies’; theories of argumentation have been brought into theories of translation to establish an emerging field of ‘translation quality assessment’; the formal study of language has established links with brain research and with sociology to bring us recent concepts such as ‘gendered speech’; to name but a few developments. The net effect of these cross-fertilisations is that there is now considerable discussion over the parameters of language-related disciplines, particularly literature, linguistics and translation, and a profusion of work at what would once have been seen as the ‘margins’. The ‘centre’ or rather ‘centres’ of interest are thus now being redefined.

It was the desire to explore some of these developments that inspired a conference, hosted at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, in 2010. Each of the papers included in the present collection had its origins in this conference, although they have since undergone extensive debate and refinement. Together, the papers present a rich palette of themes, signalling some of the diverse work which, today, can be said to comprise the discipline of language studies. Two major points of focus divide the collection into its two sections. The first, entitled *Concepts Considered*, reviews some of the theoretical concepts which underpin different aspects of language study, while the second section, entitled *Languages Considered*, pursues the application of theoretical concepts in the context of a specific language in use.

In the opening paper of the first section, Sandhya Rao Mehta takes a broad view on the evolution of language studies. Although Mehta’s main concern is with the development of English language studies, all of the themes she identifies will resonate with researchers in any language. In her paper, Mehta shows how the ‘meta-narrative’ in English studies has shifted from the concern I mentioned earlier, issues of language itself, towards something much more diffuse and dynamic: users of language, often in geographically diverse parts of the world, who assert a variety of Englishes, for their own purposes in an ever expanding number of contexts and modes. A major aspect of this is the emergence of ‘e-English’, which poses new challenges for language studies as we grapple with the analysis of virtual identities and virtual language—dynamically changing users

who equally dynamically shape new genres of language use. Mehta also points to the development of Englishes in literature, where the traditional focus on British and American literature is being forced to give way to the recognition of an expanding range of writers, from various parts of the world, now writing in English. She highlights the impact of multiple migrations, and the difficulties this presents in trying to establish precisely who is writing for which community and in which literary tradition, as transient diasporic communities lead “identities and languages [to] coalesce into increasingly complex layers” (p12).

The relationship between language use and identity is also the concern of Sachdev, who shows how language simultaneously reflects and creates group identity. Data from street interactions in bilingual Tunisia, for example, showed how pedestrians’ choice of language, when replying to requests for directions from other Tunisians, depended not only on the language of the request (Arabic or French) but also on the ethnic origin of the requester (‘brown’, ‘white’ or ‘black’). Code-switching in Arabic/French, Sachdev found, was evident with ‘brown’ Tunisians but never occurred with ‘white’ or ‘black’ compatriots, regardless of the language of the request. Sachdev argues that code-switching in conversation with ‘brown’ Tunisians thus simultaneously denoted both status (i.e. a higher level of education) and group solidarity. As Sachdev says, “linguistic choices were identity choices...permeating even the briefest interactions” (p30). This, and additional data from Canada, Bolivia, India and the Indian and Pakistani diasporas, show the strength of the link between identity and language use, a finding which, Sachdev argues, underscores the importance of supportive policies to maintain the languages of minorities.

The complexity of communication across languages and cultures is the concern of the next two authors, both of whom debate issues surrounding policies in translation. One of the key difficulties facing any translator is how ‘cultural items’ should be handled, in particular, how far they should be rendered ‘domestic’, such that any trace of the source culture is removed, or how far they should maintain their ‘foreign’ character—comprehensible but still noticeably ‘foreign’. Dickins provides a wide ranging analysis of the approaches advocated by various theorists when encountering such items, and sets out a conceptual framework to show how these approaches stand in relation to each other. The resulting grid should provide significant support to translators who need to clarify for themselves their choices in translation. In the next paper, however, Al-Sharafi advocates a particular view in translation policy, arguing for a ‘semantic’ (literal) translation of items such as proverbs, rather than a ‘communicative’ translation which abandons any trace of the source

culture and text in favour of assimilation into the target language and culture. At stake here, for Al-Sharafi, is not simply a matter of translation efficacy. Our attitudes towards the translation of cultural items can betray a hegemonic and ethnocentric attitude towards other cultures “because if we translate in ways natural to readers, then the element of learning from other cultures will disappear” (p68).

The need to establish a framework for handling language is also a concern for the next two papers, although in quite different areas, reflecting the breadth that the field of language studies now encompasses. Mamidi presents a stimulating analysis of the problems surrounding the design of dialogue systems—that is, systems which enable humans to interact with computers using natural language. Mamidi shows how the subtleties and complexities of human speech, particularly with respect to pragmatics and language in discourse, present formidable challenges for systems design. At present, only limited success has been achieved in some domains with only a restricted set of interactional outcomes possible, but Mamidi successfully shows how our knowledge of the workings of language, both as form and as meaning, will be vital in building more complex systems capable of handling interactions with humans in an ever more flexible manner.

A very different challenge concerns Danielewicz-Betz, however, as she once again returns to the earlier themes of language and identity—this time in the context of crime investigations and the use of forensic linguistics to identify the perpetrator or victim. Like Mamidi, Danielewicz-Betz finds only limited success to date in the application of linguistic knowledge, and doubts whether we will ever be able to establish the existence of a ‘linguistic fingerprint’ as reliable as DNA evidence. Despite these limitations, Danielewicz-Betz shows that linguistics can play a significant role in eliminating individuals from an investigation and in ensuring accurate statements of witness evidence.

In the final paper of this section, Moody returns to many of the issues raised by earlier writers concerning language and identity in multilingual communities, but in the context of the development of programmes of study in university English departments. Much contemporary discussion in English language teaching, argues Moody, evinces a “diffusion-of-English” model which emphasises native-speaker standards in language use, a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching materials, and a failure to recognise the complexity of the need, perception and use of English in multilingual communities. University English departments, Moody suggests, are frequently characterised by a “fragmentation of courses, an emphasis on theory and knowledge over practice, misconceptions about

students' motivation and assumptions of their inadequacy" (p114), all of which positions the student as an outsider and a failure in their own society. In a strongly argued case, Moody sets out a proposal for the development of a degree programme in English studies which would more fully take account of an ecological view of English—as it is seen, used and needed in a specific community.

In the second section of the collection, *Languages Considered*, a number of writers discuss many of the concepts raised earlier, but in the context of research into specific languages. The section opens with a paper by Geoffrey Leech which chronicles the changing nature of English grammar. Noting that many native speakers of English believe that standards of grammar use are "deteriorating", Leech argues that it is more helpful to see changes in grammar as adaptations to new influences and new possibilities in communication. Drawing on extensive data taken from corpora representing a full generation of language users—approximately 30 years—Leech presents intriguing findings which show how, for example, modals such as *may*, *must*, *need(n't)*, *ought to*, and *shall*, are becoming much less common, while forms such as *be going to*, *need to* and *have to* are increasing in use. Leech argues that there are three forces at work here: *grammaticalisation* (in which lexical phenomena evolve into grammatical phenomena), *colloquialisation* (in which spoken habits infiltrate written forms) and *Americanization* (in which American English grammatical constructions become more common in British English). Before language teachers rush to redesign their syllabi, however, Leech suggests caution: these changes are happening very slowly, although attention should always be paid to frequency of use. In this, corpora offer vital support to language teaching professionals, he argues.

Jonathan Wilcox also provides a historical perspective on language, but to a much more distant point—that of the Anglo-Saxon tale of *Beowulf*. Wilcox's paper presents a fascinating account of just how far language studies can be stretched, as he unites the three fields of literature, language and archaeology to 'dig for new meanings' in the poem. Examining Seamus Heaney's controversial translation of the poem, which incorporates language references to Catholic Ulster, Wilcox shows how choices in translation prove central to a positioning of the poem within contemporary postcolonial concerns and contested claims to the past. Just how contested the past can be was clearly brought to the surface by the discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard—a treasure trove of Anglo Saxon booty found in a field in 2009. In his account of local reactions to the find, Wilcox shows how a fictional history was woven around the objects, to create the image of the region's glorious past. For Wilcox, this was largely

prompted by “present-day Britain’s awkward status within a postcolonial world” in which it “lacks a clear sense of independent and unifying nationhood” (p160). In interpreting these reactions, however, Wilcox shows how the language of *Beowulf* and Staffordshire Hoard illuminate each other, allowing a closer reading of the significance of both the poem and the hoard, and suggesting that fragments of an Anglo-Saxon past—whether linguistic or material—can be deeply revealing of contemporary desires.

In the next paper, Quassdorf also shows how the literary language of the past may be used for contemporary purposes, as the original writer’s intention is recast to meet the modern-day user’s purpose. Quassdorf takes the reader through a new database, *HyperHamlet*, which allows cross-referencing from Shakespeare’s play to samples of modern language, to show how people draw on quotations, and relocate the sentiment expressed. She shows how frequently quoted lines from the text may come to deviate from the contextual, pragmatic and formal qualities of the original, thus achieving a growing independence from the source and a conventionalisation of use. She suggests users “relocate, re-apply and even misuse his words” such that they become part of the *langue*. In this way, we can see how Shakespeare has contributed to much to the shaping of English, as has so often been claimed.

Gaudio is also concerned with notions of incorporation, but this time *from* English into another language—Italian—in the form of anglicisms. The challenge for Gaudio is to find a basis for the translator’s decision-making in the face of anglicisms in the source text—should they be translated, glossed or left as they are? Rejecting an ‘ethical’ approach which considers issues of a ‘domesticating’ or ‘foreignising’ translation (cf Dickins and Al-Sharafī, this volume), Gaudio argues that the correct basis for translation is to look at what users actually do with the language. Anglicisms need to be analysed to determine if they are unincorporated, semi-incorporated or fully-incorporated into the target language, and an objective decision can then be made on the need for translation or glossing. To support this analysis, she argues for the cross referencing of parallel corpora from the source and target languages. Drawing on the multilingual versions of the *Official Journal of the European Union*, Gaudio gives a number of examples of anglicisms in Italian and shows how an informed decision about translation can now be made.

Al Harrasi makes extensive use of corpora in his paper to analyse how one particular metaphor—the Arab world as a human body—is used in online discussions. His analysis is set within a conceptual theory of metaphor, which presents metaphor as a device through which we map one

domain of experience, usually a concrete experience, on to another domain, normally an abstract one. Citing numerous examples, Al Harrasi shows how political discourse is peppered with references to human organs, bodily ailments, and medical procedures as a way to analyse the political difficulties which the Arab world faces. The point which Al Harrasi stresses, however, is the significance of this linguistic ideological framing and the implications it has in directing any action which is undertaken. The body politic metaphor, he argues, “leads to the dismissal of real political phenomena” and an emphasis on a fictional homogeneity which can “marginalize or even eliminate political entities that are different from the majority” (p202). Clearly, such metaphors work in the interests of some and against the interests of others.

In the final paper in the collection, Buckton-Tucker brings us back to the issues surrounding the teaching of language, echoing one of the main themes of the collection: that language rightfully belongs to its users. Drawing on an innovative technique known as ‘textual intervention’, she gives us many examples of how students can be engaged in taking ownership of their reading and their writing. Through the use of the technique, which involves students in rewriting or extending literary texts according to their own interpretation or cultural context, Buckton-Tucker shows how students may simultaneously develop a better understanding of a literary genre, improve their language skills, and find their own voice as creative language users.

Taken together, the papers in this collection provide an absorbing, rich array of subjects touched by the centrality of language. Encompassing themes from the study of social psychology, translation theory, computer science, forensics, educational policy, language change, archaeology, and literature, to name but a few, the collection shows that a concern with the role of language continues to expand through cross-fertilisation with a limitless number of other disciplines. For the field of language studies, this has meant that issues which once would have been considered marginal have now become central, as the boundaries of relevance continue to be stretched.