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Post-linguistic language studies in
(after-)colonial contexts

(Scraps of a scholarly review)

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Thank you for inviting me as a reviewer for an extremely thought-inspiring paper that breaks new ground and challenges (postcolonial) linguistics in more than one respect. It can be recommended for publication as it is. I may add a few remarks on issues that have struck me.

The paper clearly wants to be programmatic, and it is seminal in the true sense of the meaning: it will certainly spawn discussions in the diverse linguistic communities. At the same time, it wishes to be understood as this: as an intervention with a clear-cut idea, a perfectly stringent line of argumentation and smart elaboration on an intellectually high level.

My response will be twofold. Firstly, and after a synopsis, I take the liberty to tie in with a few suggestions and, sometimes, complementary remarks. For this, I will follow the chronological and chapter order of the paper. Also, I should add that I agree with the author's discontent with the state-of-the-arts in contemporary linguistics when it comes to responding flexibly (and thus adequately) to developments outside the discipline's alleged core concerns. So I am, ultimately, just as well biased toward the issue at stake. Secondly, I may develop a number of ideas which the paper has spawned in me as its reader/

reviewer. I wish these to be understood as an expression of how the paper is apt to inspire responses and respondents.

Paper synopsis

The paper teeters on the fulcrum of a coincidental simultaneity. Linguistics has reached a ‘stage of disciplinary development’ (p.10) that is characterized by ripeness and maturity – nobody seriously doubts its *raison d’être* any more – after two centuries of existence, standardization of its methods and aims, and (not to be forgotten, especially in the last half century) marginalization processes and contests about what should be central in it. The paper uses the term *late linguistics* for this state between (being) established and (being) stable to the degree of inflexible. At the same time, linguistics at large cannot overlook discursive developments in the scientific/scholarly world and communities outside its domain: the wave of postcolonial criticism is a case in point. Rightly (with Errington and others), the paper pinpoints the (linguistic) discipline’s low engagement to include the presumptions, foci and targets of postcolonial theory/criticism in its own registers and modes of “doing linguistics”. This is all the more deplorable if one observes the share of linguist(ic)s in the colonial project *and* the so-far unchallenged status of the past approaches, data-gathering methods and norms derived from these data within the discipline.

The paper takes a clear stance in this *mélange* of observations: it champions the project of a postcolonial linguistics; it criticizes established linguist(ic)s (without, however, denouncing its own belonging to the trade: the paper is clearly partial and welcomes new



Figure 1.
Double-blind peer reviewer (photo: author selfie)

impulses in “late [or grown-old] linguistics”, but it is not partisan, i.e. does not argue from a self-chosen outsider position); it discusses the numerous theoretical underpinnings, complex as they are, of what “post-” can mean.

The key word of *late-ness* finally leads to an insightful comparison of “late linguistics” as pinpointed here, with “late capitalism” as elaborated by Werner Sombart and others. Similarities abound, the paper shows. Conclusively, the author comes up with a few (as yet tentative) ideas of how “doing postcolonial linguistics” could look like, and succeed (or not).

Responses in detail(s)

1. In its description of the status quo of linguistics, the paper oscillates between what it terms a disciplinary “autobiography” (p. 1 passim, inspired by Deumert/Storch 2018) and, later (and Foucault-inspired), genealogy (p. 9 passim). I favor genealogy, and would clearly dismiss autobiography. The agent/agency to write ‘this kind of autobiography’ would be the discipline itself, not its (late-born) representatives of today (alone). Also, from a generic standpoint (= literary studies), autobiography implies that it is the recollecting individual her-/himself who produces and authenticates the text through her/his signature (“autobiographischer Pakt”, Philip Lejeune). This is different with regard to *biographies*, or *genealogies*. Sure one may ask: Can there be an ego document by actors other than linguists (i.e., “the discipline itself”)? But just as sure one may answer: the discipline could – if we allow for this metaphor of a *Wissenschaft* that remembers its coming into being
2. p. 6: I am not sure whether the notion of belated(ness) applies well here. It rings too many Freudian/psychoanalytic bells to me, especially those of trauma theory. Caesuras due to events that were missed at the time when they occurred due to their intensity/cruelty, and that have kept on troubling the surviving/present mind etc. What the author seems to suggest, though, is a continuation of the discipline with regard to its ideological entanglement in coloniality. (Having said this: the author also, and justly, demonstrates that linguistics is always already ‘belated’ in its efforts to catch up with the neighboring disciplines and their states-of-the-art with regard to disciplinary decolonization)
3. p. 7: in the passages on the restitution debate: ‘a plural French that is not (only) the language spoken in France’ - much like the Englishes, I assume? If so, there will be forerunners: scholars that have tilled the field already, though not with respect to “the Frenches” (or, for that matter, “the Germans”)
4. the third chapter confronts late *linguistics* with late *capitalism* (p. 9 passim): an immensely rewarding read! It should be observed, though, that the comparison is that of a diagnosis of a past appearance (capitalism in the first decades of the 20th century) with a present one (“crisis” of linguistics): circumstances have changed and, what is more, “capitalism” was never “late enough” to grow extinct, Fredric Jameson & Co. notwithstanding. With regard to colonialism, neo-colonial is just a more sophisticated way of saying “still a deeply capitalist mode of exploitation”. The perspective to be concluded from that would be bleak: late “linguistics” as diagnosed here, today, would prevail for another 100 years with all its rootedness in colonial certainties etc.
5. there is maybe, too, a “Verführung der Parallelen”, a misleading charm of parallels involved here: that of comparing

an earlier noun phrase (late capitalism) with a new, freshly invented one. The argument strongly pivots on the comparability of two “late-nesses” just because Sombart and others before him used that attribute, ‘late’. This leads to the rhetoric, slightly decline- and decay-infested as it is, of “late linguistics” (which, in turn, sets the agenda for the argument of the entire paper). I am fine with this, yet I also ask myself: what if the notorious ‘post’-prefix had been around as early as in the days of Sombart? What if the buzzword of “post capitalism” (Žižek, recently Paul Mason) had been around already then? Would the paper have used the term post-linguistics, then, and not ‘late linguistics’?

Stray complementary ideas

I have mentioned the cautiousness of the author not to write from outside his discipline, and to present himself as a discontented, yet insider-representative of linguistics. Linguistics itself is never, nowhere being dismissed as a discipline, a basis of argumentation etc.

6. Picking up the ball at this point, and carrying it further: it would be worth the while risking a more radical way of putting it. The paper presents linguistics as autonomous enough to assess and state where it stands. The capacity to self-define and –determine its state and status (‘which phase it is in’, p. 5) and, ultimately, its *raison d’être* are taken for granted. I may complement this with another idea: that of a heuristic discipline named post-linguistic language studies

in (after-)colonial contexts (an idea that occurred to me when pondering on No. (5), above). This would imply an *altogether discarding* of linguistics as it displays itself today (with all those Western (Euro-American) conceptualization of the world, the deeply ingrained presumptions and epistemological residues with which ‘we’ Germans and individuals of German descent had literally colonized parts of the world back in 1884-1915), not just a naming it “late”.

7. The consequences of such a self-positioning would be dire, that is for sure and I am quite aware of it. “Established” linguists would revolt, and neighboring disciplines (the remaining field of the today’s academic disciplines whose territory linguistics has entered only very/too late) would maybe refuse to grant exile. And yet, a short brainstorming would yield a first set of more concrete ideas of how “post-linguistic language studies” as a discipline could look like that has once for all said farewell to the dubious practices of linguistics during the colonial era and their spectral presence in the discipline’s post-colonial epoch.

For instance, the paper mentions the restitution debate triggered by President Macron and further fueled by the Sarr/Savoy report. Is it, or would it be conceivable to *restitute a language*? In terms of an intangible cultural heritage (“immaterielles Kulturerbe”) that has most presumably been deformed and desacralized by pressing it into the straitjackets of “our Western/global Northern linguistic con-

cepts”: by superimposing our grammar taxonomies on it, our notions of how “le signe” functions, our craze for lexicographing and charting it to (an ideal of) completion. Restituting languages in this sense might, I think, first and foremost concern disciplines other than “German languages studies” (viz. Afrikanistik etc.). It would, however too, be daunting to probe (and focalize anew) the issue of, say, (German to X) translations in now ‘a participatory partnership with Africa based on dialogue’ (p. 7). A project of ‘decolonizing translation’ would challenge anew the idea of (being able to) fully transpose the *szujet* of the source text in language X into the German target text: quite a nice perspective for the translator *métiers*, the publisher biz and lit-crit. By the same token, any German *szujet* can no longer just like that be translated into, say, an African language without heeding the peculiarities of that (now “restituted”) target language.

and no-gos of postcolonial linguistics (or even post-linguistic language studies). The intertextual aspects should be obvious (Shaw, *Pygmalion*). Gonna see. It might work out this way or that, and if it is *binge*, this is just as well okay. ‘Living in Late Linguistics’ (p. 18).

Next

As said, the paper was highly stimulating and inspiring: seminal in the true sense of the meaning. I am submitting these lines as on opening for a dialogue, which I would welcome. In me, it has moreover triggered the idea of a short-story. The tale would feature an older female Senegalese professor of linguistics (who went through all the DAAD-sponsored, German “Doktorvater” linguistic toilet training criticized here, and who had swallowed it hook, line and sinker) and her dispute with a younger Germanistik-student, Roland Blum of Bremen, on the issue of the potentials