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SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES ON RACE/GENDER/SEXUALITY – UNDISCIPLINED APPLIED LINGUISTICS

PERSPECTIVAS DO SUL SOBRE RAÇA/GÊNERO/SEXUALIDADE

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ABSTRACT: Drawing upon current theoretical discussions around the coloniality of power/knowledge, the aim of this article is to investigate a specific moment in recent South African history – the student protests that shook the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and indeed the country in 2015 and 2016. Particular focus is put on *practices*, that is, what students *did* and how their embodied performances were received on a variety of media platforms. From this vantage point, the article illustrates the coloniality of power/knowledge that regulates the intersectional nexus points of gender and race, and creates specific regimes of intelligibility and unintelligibility that praise or dismiss similar *embodied speech acts*. Ultimately, the examples from South African student protests are presented in the article with a view to reigniting the project of undisciplined applied linguistics (Moita Lopes 2006), an academic enterprise that among other things makes visible those complex inscriptions of privilege/oppression that we carry as a result of colonial history.

Keywords: gender, race, sexuality**,** southern theory, undisciplined applied linguistics

RESUMO: Com base nas discussões teóricas atuais sobre a colonialidade do poder/conhecimento, o objetivo deste artigo é investigar um momento específico da história recente da África do Sul - os protestos estudantis que abalaram a Universidade de Witwatersrand, Joanesburgo e, também, o país em 2015. e 2016. O foco específico é colocar em prática tanto as ações dos alunos, bem como o recebimento das performances destes(as) estudantes pela mídia. A partir deste ponto de vista, o artigo ilustra a colonialidade do poder/conhecimento que regula os pontos intersetoriais de nexo de gênero e raça, e cria regimes específicos de inteligibilidade e de ininteligibilidade que elogiam ou descartam atos de fala incorporados semelhantes. Em última análise, os exemplos de protestos estudantis sul-africanos são apresentados no artigo com o objetivo de relançar o projeto da lingüística aplicada indisciplinar (MOITA LOPES, 2006), um empreendimento acadêmico que, entre outras coisas, torna visíveis as complexas inscrições de privilégio/opressão que carregamos como resultado da história colonial.

Palavras-chave: gênero, raça, sexualidade, teoria do sul, lingüística aplicada indisciplinar.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to engage with some aspects of the theme of the World Congress of Applied Linguistics (*Innovation and Epistemological Challenges in Applied Linguistics*), a conference that gathered two thousand participants from around the world in Rio de Janeiro on 23-28 July 2017. I believe that the topic of the conference, as well as its geo-political location, is of particular relevance for the readers of *Cadernos Discursivos*. At this juncture, however, I want to state upfront that, in this article, I do not make any claim about innovative approaches; I do not want to propose a

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new method or a new theory. After all, as French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) would point out, we should be very suspicious about any claim to novelty and progress as such statements are discursive moves through which knowledge intersects with power. Rather, I take the location of the conference in order to harness existing research and data from the Global South about the nexus point of race/gender/sexuality in order to bring some *challenges* – epistemological and otherwise – to the field of applied linguistics.

The paper is structured as follows: I begin by locating the debate around southern perspectives in relation to existing academic discussions both inside and outside applied linguistics. I then move on to an example of "undisciplined" (Moita Lopes 2006) meaning-making practices in the context of the recent South African student protests for free, quality, decolonised education. I offer a few self-reflexive remarks about my own positionality as a privileged, white, middle-class, able-bodied, queer academic, born and raised in the North, who has recently moved back to the far North of Europe (Sweden) after eight years of living and researching in South Africa, where I retain some academic affiliations. I conclude with a few observations about the implications of the data I present for applied linguistics. But let us begin with some theoretical framing.

Setting the scene

With this article, I want to enter into an on-going dialogue that was crystallised in a special issue of the prestigious journal *Applied Linguistics* (Kellerman and Mauranen 2015). Organised under the title *Definitions for Applied Linguistics*, seven distinguished scholars in the field – six at prestigious Northern institutions and one in Australia – offered thought-provoking position article about "the past and future" (Shuy 2015) and "the death and life" (Cook 2015) of applied linguistics, as well as reflections on theoretical and methodological developments of the field (Kramsch 2015, McNamara 2015, Tarone 2015). However, as Anna Mauranen (2015) cautions in the summary that closes the special issue,

> Of course, they [the contributors] each looked at the origins [of the field] [and I would add the challenges and research priorities of the field] from their own perspectives—American, British, or Australian, with some continental European overtones—which is bound to invite divergences. (MAURANEN, 2015, p. 488)

Indeed, if entertained from the vantage point of, say, Brazil, India, or South Africa, such a project might result in even more radical divergences. And it is precisely a new vantage point that I want to bring to these discussions. I do so by expanding on Tim McNamara's (2015) observation that "Applied Linguistics is facing a *renewed challenge from theory*. This is because the field is increasingly aware of and influenced by new sources of theory, drawing on discussions of language outside the social sciences.";

McNamara (2015) goes on to conclude that "To fully appreciate the challenge represented by poststructuralism would be a revolutionary change for Applied Linguistics. This seems to me *the most important challenge* currently facing us.". (MCNAMARA, 2015, p. 475)

Having applied poststructuralist insights throughout my research career, I can attest to the importance of this epistemology for applied linguistics. However, as someone who lived in a context like South Africa for eight years, I want to add a "southern" perspective – a way of seeing as James Scott (1999) famously put it – to the poststructuralist challenge of theory.

What do I mean by "South," or "Southern"? From a world-scale perspective, the expression "Global South" as opposed to the "Global North" is useful to encapsulate the nexus of geographical positionality and histories of political marginality, as well as capture the complexity of contemporary postcolonial conditions. An engagement with the South, however, has not just to do with positioning the spotlight on a set of specific geographical, historical and political conditions.

It is also a way of bringing applied linguistic scholarship into dialogue with current discussions around a set of concepts and approaches that have variously been labelled "southern theories", "theories from the south", or "southern epistemologies", and are connected with the work of anthropologists, political scientists, and sociologists such as Boaventura da Souza Santos, Maria Lugones, Nelson Maldonado Torres, Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, to name just a few. There also an active group of "Southern"

scholars of language in social contexts which include Christopher Stroud, Quentin Williams, Amiena Peck, Ana Deumert, Kathleen Heugh, Caroline Kerfoot, Luiz Paulo da Moita Lopez, Glenda Melo, Rodrigo Borba, Branca Falabella Fabricio, and others. These researchers have inspired me in the shaping of the arguments of this article, and the reader might 'hear' their voices – metaphorically in a Bakhtinian way – entextualised in this article.

Before going further, I need to state that I am not advocating that, on the basis of the historical, economic, or socio-political specificities of Southern conditions, we should develop a conceptual and analytical apparatus that is *incommensurably* different and *separate* from Northern theorising. Rather I subscribe to a position that is premised on the inevitability of the transnational circulation of theoretical ideas, and that employs linkages strategically, envisioning possible cross-fertilisation.

While space constraints do not allow me to offer a comprehensive overview of what different southern theories, approaches and epistemologies bring with them, suffice it to say that for me a southern perspective is primarily a heuristic vantage point from which to *speak back* to the North and Northern scholarship. In this article I focus specifically on speaking back in a manner that *historicizes*, in other words, constantly reminding ourselves of the *coloniality* of power/knowledge.

Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains that

> Coloniality… refers to *long-standing* patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that *define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations and knowledge production* well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism (MALDONADO-TORRES, 2007, p. 243, emphasis added).

Most specifically, I show in this article that coloniality ultimately produces specific *regimes of intelligibility* that regulate which meaning-making practices of claim-staking are praised and ratified as legitimate, while others are made unintelligible, ridiculed, or dismissed as illegal. By taking such a southern approach, I hope to partly address Claire Kramsch's (2015) appeal to applied linguists that

> The greatest challenge will be for applied linguistic theory to theorize the *practice* in such a way as to do justice both to the heteroglossic and political diversity of the practice and to its own epistemological multiculturality, and to accept to be changed in the process. (2015, p. 463)

This should be done with cognisance that "Applied Linguistics remains faithful to its empirical mandate to identify, analyse, and possibly solve *practical problems of language and communication*" (Kramsch 2015: 461, emphasis added). And to judge from the AILA website, the issue of "solving problems of language and communication" seems to be the key component of how Applied Linguistics is defined, at least officially by its world association (https://aila.info).

It is an example of the "practical problem of language and communication" that I want to examine in this article. Under the label "language and communication", I do not merely refer to verbal and written codes, or registers and styles, but to a broader variety of meaning-making resources that include the body and its interfaces with the materiality of the built environment. More specifically, I investigate a specific moment in recent South African history – the student protests that shook the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg and indeed the country in 2015 and 2016. I do so by looking at *practices*, that is, what students *did* and how their embodied performances were received on a variety of media platforms. From this vantage point, I illustrate the coloniality of power/knowledge that regulates the intersectional nexus points of gender and race, and creates specific regimes of intelligibility and unintelligibility that praise or dismiss similar *embodied speech acts*.

The examples in this article are part of an eclectic archive that includes: (1) university management email communication with staff during the student protests; (2) news reports and op-ed pieces about the protests in mainstream South African media; (3) Tweets and Facebook posts commenting on mainstream reporting about the protests; and most importantly, (4) my own lived experience as a privileged member of staff, whose own able-bodiedness, whiteness, and maleness allowed him to navigate the campus in a relatively safe and sheltered way, in the context of ongoing warfare.

As Ana Deumert and Nkululeko Mabandla (2017) note with regard to eclectic methodologies that draw upon among other things one's own observations and experiences, "Such an approach might appear 'anecdotal' to the more empirically-minded sociolinguist [or applied linguist]; yet, anecdotalism has a logic of its own and is important in achieving phenomenological understanding" (Deumert and Mabandla 2017: 402).

Most of the readers of *Cadernos Discursivos* were not in South Africa during the protests, or more specifically, in Johannesburg on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand where I worked, so in what follows I begin by locating the specific semiotic practices which I am going to analyse within the broader context of the student protests, and hopefully give a sense of the highly complex, and emotional atmosphere on campus at the time.

South African student protests

It is practically impossible to do justice to South African student protests over the last few years within the space of a journal article (however see e.g., Gillespie and Naidoo 2019). Moreover, retellings of historical events bear with them the risk of constructing a simplified linearity that inevitably downplays the complexity and multi-layeredness of what actually happened. South Africa has a long history of student protests. In the relatively recent past of state-sanctioned racial segregation and domination – *apartheid* – the *Soweto Uprisings* of 1976 were a reaction by both students and the broader public against the introduction of Afrikaans as compulsory medium of instruction in schools for black people. The uprisings have become and continue to be hailed as a historical milestone in black people's resistance to the white supremacist racial order. Forty years later, and now within a democratic system, students are still protesting, this time, their goal is a more just higher educational system that, as the students put it, should be "*quality, free and decolonized*". Why these requests?

Despite the fact that the majority of tertiary education institutions in South Africa are public, university fees remain very high. Admittedly fees vary from university to university, but a year of undergraduate tuition at the University of the Witwatersrand costs approximately 50,000 South African Rand, which corresponds to 3,700 USD, 3,200 EUR, or 12,000 Brazilian Reals, and is only slightly lower than the *average* annual income of a black family. In contrast, a white family earns on average six times more than a black household.

Each year in September/October, the Department of Higher Education and Training sets the annual fee increment, which is typically higher than inflation. Students do have access to a Byzantine public financial aid system, supplemented by corporate grants, but poor administration, unfair rules, and insufficient funding mean that many students are left out. Those that make it into university find that the curriculum for many disciplines including sociology, anthropology, and linguistics is mainly based on literature produced in Northern/Western contexts, using methods and yielding results that are perceived by many South African students as not only irrelevant, but also hostile, even violently so, to their own lived experiences.

It is against this backdrop that students began to demand from university management and staff a more proactive approach to the colonial legacy of the university. At the University of Cape Town, this legacy was most cogently embodied in the statue of the arch-imperialist and mining magnate Cecil John Rhodes. At the #RhodesMustFall protests in 2015 students demanded his statue be removed from their campus. This call catalysed the nationwide #FeesMustFall movement as well as spawning a global campaign that soon spread to Oxford University and elsewhere. As a result of the 2015 protests, the Department announced a 0% fee increase for 2016, and Cecil John Rhodes was removed from the steps of the University of Cape Town.

In 2016 inflation was at a 6.5% level, Universities had not been able to raise fees, but the Department of Higher Education and Training had also not sufficiently increased funding to universities in order to cover the shortfall. University administrators began to fret over budgets. Students, on the other hand, were not satisfied with a fee freeze, and wanted instead a long-term commitment to free education. So what did the Department do?

In September 2016, higher education minister Blade Mzimande announces that universities are *permitted to* implement a fee increase of up to a maximum of 8%. Students immediately start protesting. Observe how, in an email sent to staff and students, the Senior Executive Team at the University of the Witwatersrand re-entextualises the Minister's statement as an authoritative statement of fact: according to them, "the Minister of Higher Education, Dr Blade Nzimande, *recommended* an 8% increase in university fees for 2017". In the same email, we were also informed that:

> Some students rejected this recommendation by the Minister and decided to embark on protests that involved some disruption of classes and some closures of entrances. Campus control and private security tried to contain these protests and public order police were called in to clear the entrances. This was done by around 5pm and traffic was allowed to flow without disruption although inconvenience was caused to individuals in the hours before. Staff and some students did at times get annoyed, but overall most people behaved in a measured way.
> We do want members of the University community to recognise that in circumstances such as this it is important to get the balance right in managing the protest. If we are too heavy handed, it could backfire. If we are too soft, then it could embolden the violation of rights of others**.** This is the difficulty we have to manage, and when confronted in circumstances like this, we urge all members of the University community to be patient and to work with us so that we can address the challenge as quickly as is possible.
> Our priority, it must be remembered, is to keep the academic programme intact. The future of too many students and families depend on their performance at university, and we should do all that is possible to ensure that the academic programme is protected. This is why we kept the University open and why we will continue to do so. We have beefed up security even further and have finalised protocols with the police to ensure that safety and security is in place at Wits.
> We have also come to an agreement with the student leadership. This entails the following: they will be allowed to use the Concourse in Solomon Mahlangu House (Senate House) between 5 and 10 pm. They have committed not to block entrances and not to disrupt classes. Should anyone do so, the University will act appropriately to protect our community and environment through a range of measures, including suspensions and arrests. It is important to reiterate that while we will protect the right to protest, we will not condone the violation of the rights of others and the destruction of property. It is important that the student leadership recognises that their responsibility is to the entire student body and not only to a narrow section of it.
> Please note that tomorrow is business as usual. We will have heightened security measures to ensure the safety and the protection of all. There may as a result be minor inconveniences experienced and we ask you to bear with us in this regard. Please note that we will allow protests so long as they are peaceful and do not violate the rights of the University community.
> Communiques will come out regularly in the coming days to keep all members of the University community up to date on developments. Please also follow @Wits_News and @WitsUniversity for updates. We thank all members of the community for their patience and forbearance in these difficult times. Know however, that we as a community can only grow stronger through the collective resolution of these challenges.
>
> Sincerely
> Senior Executive Team
> 19 September 2016

This email is not idiosyncratic but contains some key words which will be recurrent in the following weeks' communication with staff and students, that indicate deeper ideological issues, and ultimately resulted in *"practical problems" – not just of language and communication,* but also of personal safety and well-being:

(1) Words such as "*Minor inconveniences*" are manifestations of the university management's "mitigation strategies" (Wodak 2001) that toned down issues of bodily safety for everyone on campus, and especially for female students and staff, who, as it will happen later, were harassed by male private security officers. This mitigating rhetoric was used to justify the directive to continue all teaching and learning activities with the exception of a few days when the university was closed down.

(2) "*Collective resolution of the struggle*" and similar expressions reflect management's commitment to the notion of an idealised rational public debate, where both students and administrators have an equal "right to speak" and a chance to be heard. As Sara Mills points out, "not everyone is able to make statements, or to have statements taken seriously by others" (2003: 65), often because those statements have been uttered in what is dismissed as 'wrong', 'bad', 'inappropriate', or '*irrational'* spoken or written repertoire. I will return below to the unintelligibility of what is deemed emotional behavior because it is the crux in the practical problem of language and communication between university administration and students.

(3) Management's lack of understanding of the symbolic loading of specific university spaces and their rights to control these spaces. The central administrative building of the university, Senate House, for example, was officially renamed Solomon Mahlangu House – in tribute to the student activist executed by the apartheid government in the 1970s – but only after sustained pressure from students. In the e-mail, management invoked its "right" to limit access to university spaces, but this act has infamous historical precedents and ideological associations with the Trespass Act of 1959, which still has legal force and, during apartheid was used to police and constrain black bodies' mobility through a variety of spaces.

It is unclear whether student representatives actually agreed on the terms of admission to Solomon Mahlangu House. Either way, the broader student collective was enraged by what they saw as an encroachment on their freedom to access a symbolic space for political action. This escalated the conflict. Students saw Solomon House as a home from which they were suddenly excluded, and needed to re-conquer by any

means, including *intifada*-like stone-throwing. Police and private security in riot gear responded with force, using stun grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets, as well as in at least one case throwing stones back at the students.

It is in the context of this campus warfare that something remarkable happened: three black female students created a moment of truce – albeit a brief one – by taking off their t-shirts, and marching bare-chested towards the row of police vehicles, with their hands crossed above their heads, as if enchained. I have decided to focus on this specific event because it encapsulates the main "problem of language and communication" between university management and students, which ultimately prevented the "collective resolution" of the struggle that the university wanted to achieve. This event also allows me to address the issue of the coloniality of knowledge I mentioned earlier in relation to southern perspectives to applied linguistics. However, I have deliberately chosen not to reproduce the images of the naked protest, which are readily available on various social media sites, because I do not want to re-create here the possibility of setting up the conditions of the *colonial prurience*, which I am about to criticise, and which is based on an affective mixture of shock, titillation, and disgust.

The videos of the bare-chested women immediately went viral on Twitter and Facebook, and generated a flurry of reactions both in support of and against the three women's actions by a variety of commentators in and outside South Africa. The supportive comments highlighted the *bravery* of the three women, their *vulnerability*, and the *potential harm* they exposed themselves to, as well as comments about the attractiveness of their body parts – mainly breasts and buttocks. In contrast, the dismissive pronouncements against their bodily and linguistic practices can be divided into three main groups:

(1) *Body-shaming utterances* that are supposed to be humorous and raise laughter by making fun of the "aesthetic inappropriateness" of the three students' bodies for public spectacle; according to this logic, women marching naked is only acceptable if their bodies conform to specific aesthetic ideals of slimness, fitness, as well as of specific shapes of breasts and buttocks;

(2) *Dehumanising statements* in which the three students are compared to a broad spectrum of animals;

(3) Comments about the *public indecency* of the actual act.

I will consider each of these in turn. For similar reasons to what I mentioned earlier about my decision not to reproduce the photos of the protest, I will not present these body-shaming jokes in order to avoid setting up the conditions for any form of laughter – even nervous one – among the audience of the journal; I will also not show the dehumanising statements in order not to embellish them with an academic veneer and thus diminish the injurious loading of the discourses I am criticising. If the reader feels the need to see the data, they can find it easily through a simple Google search.

What is important to underscore for the purposes of this article is that body-shaming utterances that play on the repugnance and inappropriateness of certain body shapes are the other side of the coin of those remarks in support of the protesters praising the erotic appeal of those very bodies. Viewed from a feminist perspective, all these comments are manifestations of a problematic voyeuristic and fetishistic "male gaze", as film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) famously called it, which feels entitled to monitor women, reduce them to a bodily commodity, and remark upon them, saying publicly what is agreeable to a man's eye, and what thereby is approved and ratified, and what is not. The "male gaze" is not a prerogative of male-bodied individuals, and women too can assess themselves and other female bodies in this way.

What makes the body-shaming comments significant in the South African context is not gender alone; it is *the mutually constitutive nature* of gender and race that emerges out of colonialism (see also Borba and Milani 2019). From a historicising perspective, the three students' bodies are just a small piece in a broader historical puzzle in which black female bodies have been the object of attention and inspection. The prurient comments in 2016 about the students' breasts and buttocks are nearly *word for word* repetitions of what British and other European scientists and commentators said about black female bodies in the 18th, 19th and 20th century. The best-known case is perhaps that of Sarah Baartman, the Khoisan woman forcibly taken to Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century where she was turned into an object of public curiosity. It is

also not accidental that in the same way as Sarah Baartman's movements and bodily traits were compared to that of animals, the students were also described in animalistic ways, and their behaviour deemed unacceptable because it was seen as *irrationally non-human*. Interestingly, the reason/emotion dichotomy was also used by the university management in order legitimise its own allegedly rational handling of the protests while dismissing what Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib later called "the politics of spectacle" as an irrational act lacking political pragmatic judgment.

But, according to one of the three protesting women, Sarah Mokwebo, it is precisely the emotional force produced by a naked black female body in a public that lies at the heart of their act of claim-staking, their "affective agency" (Ferrada, Bucholtz and Corella in press). As Sarah Mokwebo pointed out in an interview

> Emotionally, we're drained. This is emotional work. I think this is what people tend not to acknowledge or understand. Students don't just put their bodies in the firing line because it's fun, or we're trying to not write exams, or whatever the case people think may be. We're safer than we were yesterday, but we're still cautious about the presence of private security currently on campus, who also physically and sexually assault, and harass students. (http://www.marieclaire.co.za/mc-recommends/wits-student-sarah-mokwebo-went-topless-changed-protest)

To theorise from Sarah Mokwebo's statement and the actions of the three black women, one could propose that the naked protest was an example of what Chris Stroud calls linguistic/semiotic citizenship. I find Stroud's notion particularly helpful to conceptualise "social justice as the struggle for self-determination" (Bucholtz 2017). Linguistic/semiotic citizenship captures

> what people do with and around language(s) [and other multimodal means including the body] in order to position themselves agentively and to craft new, emergent, subjectivities of political speakerhood, often *outside of those prescribed or legitimated in institutional frameworks of the state*.

And this, as Sarah Mokwebo highlights, involves the harnessing of specific "structures of feelings" (Williams 1954), which include the strategic invoking of the historical trauma of slavery through the repletion of the performance of the naked enchained black body.

So what went wrong? Where lies the "practical problem of language and communication" in the three students' embodied speech act? Why was this embodied

speech act and similar ones that actively relied on emotions dismissed by many, including university management, as the performance of a pack of irrational creatures? Enlightenment rationality and universalism served to legitimise colonisers as worthy winners who ought to take care of the material assets of irrational, and therefore irresponsible, colonized losers (Macghilchrist 2016). This was achieved *inter alia* through a re-signification of gender. As Xhercis Mendez provocatively proposes, viewed from a critical perspective on colonialism, gender cannot be reduced to a relation between an undifferentiated category of "'Men' and 'Women' because to reduce it in this fashion means to obscure the bodies and histories of the *enslaved* and the critical role they played in giving gender new meaning" (2015: 46, emphasis added). Put differently, colonial rationality warped the mutually constitutive nexus of gender and race and made it the very condition of what counts as human or not, and thereby justified social relations in the colonies and the metropoles. Although colonialism is allegedly long gone, a colonial rationality inheres in the body-shaming and animalistic commentaries on the naked protest in 2016.

Furthermore, colonial rationality was compounded by a concern about moral respectability (Stoler 1989). From a colonial perspective, the enslaved black body needed controlling not only because it was viewed as irrational and less than human, but also because it was considered degenerate and lacking decorum. This is what also appeared in the reactions against the naked protest. A YouTube commentator said: "How did these foolish women make it to varsity... they must get arrested for public indecency... what is this? umhlanga? ... my goodness! where have you ever heard of free tertiary education, reduction yes but free... come now :/"

This was not an individual and random remark. The issue of indecent exposure was also raised by then-Acting National Police Commissioner Khomotso Pahlane in a press conference. His comments appeared on several online media sites and were re-tweeted widely. The news site *The Citizen* writes

> Acting national police commissioner, Lieutenant General Khomotso Phahlane argued that the police were lenient on three female protesters, who stripped topless baring their breasts in a bid to reach ceasefire, because they had engaged in "public indecency".
>
> "When those students took off their clothes was that not public indecency? Is public indecency not an offence? It is within our mandate. Where are their

> parents? We must call them to order," Phahlane said.
>
> Phahlane said he had visited various campuses in the province on Tuesday to see the aftermath for himself.
>
> He called on protesting students to refrain from attacking law enforcement officers while saying that its members would also exercise maximum restraint and engage in meaningful dialogue. (https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/1305150/police-against-naked-protest-call-for-maximum-restraint/)

In South Africa, indecent exposure is covered – quite literally – by the *Sexual Offences Act* of 2007, revised in 2015. According to the Act, the intentional exposure of genitals, anus and breasts in public – whether for sexual arousal of not – does indeed count as an offence, on condition that a third party lodge a complaint.

Research on the history of gender and sexuality have amply demonstrated that the erotic loading of specific anatomic parts and not others is neither genetic nor universal, but historically and socio-culturally situated. If we are to believe 18th century English novels, there is nothing more erotic for a heterosexual English squire than the female ankle, the sheer sight of which arouses in him virile thoughts. On the other hand, women and men in many cultures of the world lived and still live their public lives showing breasts, buttocks, and genitals.

Moreover, as the Merriam Webster dictionary indicates, the word "breast" does not only indicate mammary glands in female bodies, but more broadly "the fore or ventral part of the body between the neck and the abdomen". What I want to highlight is that men have breasts too – although in English speaking contexts this body part is typically called "chest" or "pecs" in daily parlance. Now, let us consider what happened in Johannesburg when a white man took off his shirt and showed his "breasts" – well his chest or pecs – in public and started directing the traffic at a major intersection during an electricity black out.

The man justified his action by saying: "I had to take off my shirt to make sure I was visible and wouldn't get run over". This is also what the three black women at Wits had tried to achieve: to use nakedness to signify vulnerability, in order not to get shot by the police. Similar embodied speech acts, with parallel intentions, however led to very different effects. My point is that this difference is incredibly significant and is not accidental.

The three bare-chested black female students, whose bodies did not fit in normative ideas of slimness, were made fun of, viewed as irrational creatures, scornfully condemned as "foolish women" who should be "arrested for public indecency", and treated (even though they were all over 18) as naughty kids whose parents should "call them to order". In contrast, the bare-chested white man, whose body matches normative ideas of the toned and fit masculine physique, was hailed in many local news reports as a "saviour" who "used six-pack powers" for the good of fellow citizens. While the naked protest at Wits University was dismissed by many commentators as an "indecent" act of linguistic/semiotic citizenship, the white man's exposure of his toned upper-body was unanimously celebrated as a praise-worthy act of citizen engagement – a "random act of kindness" as the news put it. In a context like South Africa where, despite economic development and a growing black middle class, only 19% of black households own cars, compared to 91% of whites, one should ask whether the kind act of directing traffic really is that "random," after all.

The difference in reception of the two embodied speech acts does *not* lie in an alleged erotic differential between female breasts and male chests. Put simply, it is not that his chest is less erotic than their breasts. Observe how the erotic appeal of his chiseled upper-body is overtly harnessed by the journalists in the news reporting. The radio station *Jacaranda FM* prefaced the news report saying:

> Ladies, be prepared to pray to get stuck in traffic because this gent is a beaut of note! Sigh, if only all pointsmen could look like this... (https://www.jacarandafm.com/shows/the-complimentary-breakfast-with-rian-van-heerden/sexiest-traffic-cop-found-joburg/)

And *The Rosebank and Killarney Gazette* wrote

> Luckly for motorists (and the ladies), 29-year-old Jarryd Bands stepped up to assist with directing traffic at a busy intersection…This young man could definitely be South Africa's sexiest cop (https://rosebankkillarneygazette.co.za/152006/topless-traffic-cop-saves-the-day/)

Here the journalists' *winks* at imagined audiences reproduce heteronormative assumptions about who is and should be allowed to enjoy a bare-chested male body. Most importantly, it is the very erotic appeal of this specific type of fit gendered body

that is newsworthy, and worth flirting *about*, that forms the basis for Jerryd Bands's supposed election as "South Africa's sexiest cop".

In their insightful study of the relationship between language, gender and race in the context of drag king performances in Cape Town, Mooniq Shaikjee and Christopher Stroud note that

> An important dimension of enduring coloniality is the 'knowledge' we have of our embodied, gendered, racialised and sexualized selves, and the praxes/practices through which these selves can be inserted into the everyday. Concepts of gender and race that evolved out of imperial coloniality remain tightly imbricated in contemporary forms of coloniality/modernity. (Shaikjee and Stroud 2017: 372)

It is this coloniality of knowledge that is at work in determining the legibility of the body, dispensing differential treatment for similar embodied speech acts of nakedness. The affective and embodied message of the naked protest at Wits University became incomprehensible for some social actors, while the naked man became immediately recognisable and praised, because of a colonial matrix that regiments public in/decency and ultimately determines what counts as an acceptable versus unacceptable bodily act.

Loci of enunciation

But who am I to say this? Drawing upon Homi Bhabha (1994), Brazilian sociolinguist Lynn Mario Menezes de Sousa reminds us that all representations emerge out of "specific socially, ideologically, and historically located discursive 'loci of enunciation'" (2007: 137). In no way do I mean to be claiming to speak on behalf of the three female black protesters. On the contrary, I read these acts as a white male academic whose raced and gendered body protected me during the protests and allowed me to navigate the university campus far more safely than black female students. Even if I am not speaking *on behalf of* the students, the very decision for a white male academic to focus on black female bodies as the topic of one's research is not viewed as completely uncontroversial in South Africa by many sexual and gender activists who

bemoan any scholarship in which researchers are not themselves members of the groups they are studying.

From an intersectional perspective, our lived experiences are shaped very differently because of the dynamic interaction between, on the one hand, a plethora of mutually constituting 'macro' social factors – class, gender, race, sexuality, citizen/refugee status, etc. – and, on the other hand, a variety of individual specific 'micro' circumstances. To a certain degree there is something irreducibly unique in each individual's experience of the world. However, to say that one can only speak for oneself is based on the "illusion […] that a self […] consists in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others" (Alcoff 1991: 21). Whether speaking for oneself or with and about others, "we are collectively caught in an intricate, delicate web in which each action I take, discursive or otherwise, pulls on, breaks off, or maintains the tensions in many strands of a web in which others find themselves moving also" (Alcoff 1991: 21; see also Milani and Lazar 2017).

With this conundrum in mind, for me what three black female bodies did at Wits University is not so much an act to be analysed, but as Luiz Paulo da Moita Lopes (2017) argues, is an example that illustrates how "practice is ahead of theory", it is an example of undisciplined practice of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009) from which to learn as an applied linguist. So what are the implications for applied linguistics?

Conclusions

I began this article by saying that I wanted to offer a southern perspective on current discussions about epistemological challenges to applied linguistics. I used an example of "practical problems of language and communication" spurred by Kramsch's encouragement to "theorize the *practice* in such a way as to do justice both to the heteroglossic and political diversity of the practice and to accept to be changed in the process" (2015: 463).

First, the embodied acts presented in this article might not be the kind of language and communication that most applied linguists would typically bring under

their analytical spotlight; but, instead of dismissing such embodied acts as "this is not applied linguistics", I hope that applied linguists will take the opportunity to further expand the analytical remit of this broad field of inquiry towards what Amiena Peck and Chris Stroud have named "skinscapes" (2015) and Alastair Pennycook (2018) called "post-humanist applied linguistics", that is, a focus on the materiality of the body and its complex interface with space.

Second, I hope it was clear that the examples I showed you are not idiosyncratic and trivial but capture "the banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolony" (Mbembe 1992); these embodied speech acts might appear "mundane" and "offensive" but they encapsulate the dramatic entanglement between "wider problems of subjection and its corollary, indiscipline" (Mbembe 1992: 1). In order to understand this entanglement, from a southern perspective, we need to repurpose poststructuralism and take into account the way in which *coloniality* structures how people think and feel – the two being mutually intertwined. This is not simply to say that we should consider race as an analytical construct, but also and most importantly, that we should account for its *colonial pedigree*, which imbricated race with other social categories in a mutually constitutive knot. And this applies not simply to a "post-colony" like South Africa, but should be taken into serious account in a variety of other contexts that still fail to take into account the *coloniality* of their current conditions – Sweden, my current home, being a case in point. In arguing for an engagement with coloniality, a southern perspective to applied linguistics resonates well with some of the powerful and cogent arguments advanced by some US-based scholars working on race in the USA, who coalesce around the notion of *raciolinguistics* (see e.g. the contributors to the collection edited by Alim, Rickford and Ball 2016). However, from a southern vantage point, it is my hope that raciolinguistics does not end up falling into the easy trap of universalising US-specific discourses and practices. In saying so, I want to re-cast and re-purpose the concerns voiced by Brazilian sociologist Richard Miskolci about US-based "queer of color critique":

> Queer of Color Critique has played an important and positive role in the renewal and expansion of Queer Theory. But I can also assert that it is more local and US-centric than it recognizes. The "world" inside it is "still" centered in the US academic perspective, whose interests, networks and theoretical models it pursues. There is nothing wrong with that. What is

> problematic is that this local frame and its implications for the geopolitics of knowledge are not questioned. (MISKPLCI, 2014, p. 27)

In light of this, raciolinguistics and southern perspectives on coloniality can forge key alliances in the struggle against the circulation of global white hegemony.

Third and finally, to theorise specifically from what the three black female students did, applied linguistics should not fear performing *undisciplined* acts of nakedness, laying bare our skin, making visible those complex inscriptions of privilege/oppression that we carry as a result of colonial history. And, related to this, we should also take the risk of making ourselves *illegible* in our nakedness. As Scott puts it, "legibility is a condition of manipulation", "Illegibility […] remains a reliable source for political autonomy" (1999). Viewed from the South, instead of trying to "solve practical problems of language and communication" or even to correct language "mistakes" – as a closed Facebook group that complained about the English usage of the Brazilian organisers of World Congress of Applied Linguistics presumed to – we should consider that it is precisely in the "problem" and in the "mistake" that the potential for political insubordination lies.

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