



Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal

ISSN: 0123-4641

Facultad de Ciencias y Educación de la Universidad
Distrital, Bogotá Colombia

de Queiroz Sousa, Laryssa Paulino

Pennycook, A. (2018). Posthumanist applied linguistics. Oxford and New York: Routledge

Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal, vol. 21, no. 1, 2019, January-June, pp. 139-142

Facultad de Ciencias y Educación de la Universidad Distrital, Bogotá Colombia

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=305762630009>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's webpage in redalyc.org

UDEM
redalyc.org

Scientific Information System Redalyc

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America and the Caribbean, Spain and
Portugal

Project academic non-profit, developed under the open access initiative



Pennycook, A. (2018). *Posthumanist applied linguistics*. Oxford and New York: Routledge

Laryssa Paulino de Queiroz Sousa¹

Citation/ Para citar este Artículo: Sousa, L. P. Q. (2019). Pennycook, A. (2018). *Posthumanist applied linguistics*. Oxford and New York: Routledge. *Colomb. Appl. Linguistic. J.*, 21(1), pp. 139-142.

Received: 27-Dec.-2018 / **Accepted:** 4-Apr.-2019

Within a special focus on applied linguistics, in this text Pennycook scrutinizes posthumanism as a construct and questions the ontological status of human beings, as the material world that surrounds and constitutes us becomes one of the central elements of attention. Much of the discussion is inspired by contemporary reevaluations of Indigenous knowledge and of our relationship with the world.

In the first chapter, the author explains how posthumanism encompasses several areas and emphatically problematizes what it means to be human, so that dividing lines between what is understood as, for example, exterior and interior, culture and nature, created by humanism, can be rethought as well as the dichotomies that they foster. In this perspective, human destructiveness and non-human others are considered (i.e., going beyond anthropocentrism), alongside ongoing technological changes, and our relationship with other animals and objects. As Pennycook states, humanism is an exclusionary category and he urges us to reflect on why we consider humans as distinct from everything else. For him, “posthumanism raises significant questions for applied linguistics in terms of our understandings of language, humans, objects and agency” (p. 6). Posthumanism is an umbrella term, which “draws on multiple strands of thought and points in multiple directions” (p. 5), encompassing the questioning of human centrality and exceptionalism, our anthropocentric way of understanding everything around us, the role of

objects and space in everyday life, the impact of technology on human enhancement as well as on human communication, among other concerns. In sum, posthumanism is a position that compels us to rethink our relationship with the rest of the world.

In chapter two, Pennycook concentrates on humanism and how it has impacted the way we think about humans and non-human others. He then focuses on the hierarchies and exclusionary categories within humanity. The author zeroes in on how humanism is linked to religion as well as science and immanence, and introduces some thoughts from posthumanist viewpoints concerning these topics. Further, Pennycook touches upon the notion of human rights and its links to humanism and human exclusivism and proposes a form of situated ethics that are grounded on localized understandings of things (i.e., in order to have a comprehensive grasp of anything, it is important to consider its context and specificities, and not to generalize and homogenize the phenomena that occur around it and with it). Based on the concept of posthumanist performativity (Barad, 2003, 2007), which considers the dynamic relation between discursive practices and materiality, he directs his attention to new materialisms, which impel us to take up new forms of politics that encompass matter and the more-than-human world. The author relates posthumanism to poststructuralism and other movements, mainly with respect to their interrogation of the subject. In addition, he briefly discusses some possibilities for understanding the

¹ Doctoral student - Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil. laryssa.paulino1@gmail.com.

world beyond human exceptionalism, as humans are treated as entangled with the rest of the world, and how that might influence our understanding of language as well.

In the third chapter, from his own experiences underwater as a scuba diver, Pennycook highlights the importance of the physical space and its surroundings and how they affect how we think in an interrelated way as the material world becomes part of our cognition. He claims that cognition, language, and agency are distributed, and in this line of reasoning, he introduces concepts such as extended mind and extended cognition. The material world thereby is perceived as part of our extended cognition, and things have agency in the sense that they become part of our cognitive routines – they have impacts on us. The author discusses the notion of repertoires, and that, from a posthumanist perspective, repertoires (of which language practices are an element) involve a greater diversity of resources, understood spatially and in a distributed way. From that, Pennycook approaches the notion of distributed language, as he rejects the understanding of language as internalized in someone's head, and rather focuses on how "language is part of a much broader set of semiotic possibilities" (p. 51). From this perspective, he addresses the idea of semiotic assemblages, which concern "the complexity of things that come together in vibrant, changeable exchanges of everyday life" (p. 54).

In chapter four, the author examines our anthropocentric view of the senses. In addition, he briefly discusses how animals can "become part of an extended sensory and cognitive apparatus" (p. 56), like guide dogs for the blind (as the owner's thinking and sensing extend out beyond their bodies into a wider world through the dog), and how such relations have the power to transform our experiences with the world. Pennycook urges us to think of ways to explore multisensorial semiotic assemblages, that is, to broaden our understanding of "sensory scapes" (p. 56) and their relations to everything around us, as they become assemblages constituted by the intertwined interplay between the material and discursive world. Further, Pennycook specifically explains how smell has been regarded as one of the

least important of our senses in the West, along with other constructions like the body/mind duality. From a historical perspective, the author highlights how the relations between smells, cities, and the Other were constructed throughout the years, as well as the impacts of those constructions, such as the proclamation of "the universality of humanity" (p. 59), which has created hierarchies among people and has stigmatized all those not deemed human enough according to pre-established categories. Moreover, he addresses semiotic, linguistic, and sensory landscapes and their connections. He also mentions the Deaf community and creole speakers and the challenges they face concerning their languages and humanist ideals of being human; and he adds that sign languages can help us better understand "language in spatiotemporal and embodied terms" (p. 68). As he concentrates on multisensory assemblages and expatiates mainly upon smell and its semiotic possibilities, he encourages us to think beyond what we understand as senses, as we can enlarge our understanding of them by also considering elements, such as, for instance, pain, pressure, temperature, and balance as senses (Wade, 2009).

In the fifth chapter, the author shares some recent studies that have demonstrated that other animals share traits with us which were previously only considered human. Pennycook addresses how humans and animals are mutually affected by each other and points out some of the problems of anthropocentric and anthropomorphic ideas that limit our understanding of other animals, still based on (neo)humanist concepts. The author exemplifies this argument by stating that we tend to "map human ideas and emotions onto animals and try to understand them according to our own ways of thinking rather than in their own terms" (p. 76). In this line of thought, current perceptions of language play a crucial role in attempting to distinguish humans from other animals, still based on Cartesian conceptions. Pennycook shows how such perspectives, along with arguments by Descartes and Chomsky, for example, support the view of language as something "internalized, formalized and grammaticalized" (p. 81). Grounded on a universalist way of thinking, such positions ignore the bigger picture of communication which includes,

for example, gestures, nonverbal communication, and other sensory domains. The author focuses on the capacity of pointing in order to exemplify some of his assertions, as he shows that much of the research done so far has concentrated on “an insistence on constructing an idea of a universal human capacity so that only humans can be seen to do it” (p. 84). He corroborates we should think of diversity rather than universality in order to expand our understandings of language, as “embodied, embedded, enacted and distributed” (p. 89).

In the sixth chapter, Pennycook explains that much of the research about mutual intelligibility has overlooked important aspects concerning the communicative process and interactions among people. He approaches some dogmas of intersubjective conformity and criticizes Saussure’s model of talking heads, as well as its ramifications derived from a humanist way of thinking about language. The author contends that mutual misunderstanding should be considered, instead, so we may try to understand language in its messiness (that is, the interactions that actually take place). He then presents some examples of multilingual communication, in which translanguing negotiation strategies are employed. Pennycook states the main problem is that language is generally understood through the models of monolingual communication “based on a particular framework of mutual understanding” (p. 95). As he presents examples, he indicates the importance of spatial arrangements, practices adopted by the interlocutors, objects, and spatial repertoires (as a whole set), and how they become part of the action. Furthermore, he draws on the idea of assemblages, which “provide a particular set of semiotic possibilities” (p. 99). Pennycook argues for a greater space for opacity, rather than transparency, regarding communication, to get beyond rationalist and universalist assumptions about mutual understanding. The author explains how understanding is not simply a matter of passing information from one head to another, but rather a matter of alignment (an ongoing process of adaptation). In addition, he states that the material world needs to be taken into account, in a way that, more than lining up with it, we need to tune in to it. Ergo, he opts for the term attunement, which includes non-human actors as well.

In chapter seven, Pennycook showcases several debates over reality between realism and relativism. He claims the way materiality is dealt with is paramount and mentions some instances to exemplify the discussion, like rocks, tables, and language. The author explains how humanist understandings such as transcendental idealism bases everything on human perception (an anthropocentric perspective), and then focuses on the effects of such understandings upon language and communication. Pennycook explains the segregational and integrational perspectives: the former defends an opposition between constructionism and realism, and the latter argues to consider both constructionist and realist positions in an integrated way. Further, he writes about critical realism and speculative realism (object-oriented ontology), new materialism and, again, the concept of reality; and then he proposes a critical posthumanist realism, which encompasses the concerns of critical applied linguistics and the material world. In addition, the author discusses some of the challenges for applied linguistics, such as “the status of languages as real entities, the relationships between language and a real world, and the possibilities of thinking in alternative ways about language and reality” (p. 123).

In the eighth chapter, Pennycook addresses posthumanism and entanglement (assemblages, attunements, and alignments), criticizes anthropocentric ways of thinking about the world and materiality, questions humans’ relationship with nature, and urges us to engage with other perspectives. He then focuses on how anthropocentrism has influenced applied linguistics and how posthumanism can help us understand language, cognition, context, and communication in broader terms, preferably in an ethnographic way, as a distributed process, in which “social, spatial, and embodied dimensions of language” are considered (p. 131). The author approaches some trends in applied linguistics which share similar principles with posthumanism and endorses the need to provincialize both language and humanity, that is, to decenter them from their supposed superior ontological status, by considering their limits and materiality, in a more balanced way in relation to everything else that constitutes the world as well, as

an option for a renewed approach to critical applied linguistics. By taking into account discussions held by old and new materialisms, he concentrates on the idea “of the commons, of shared knowledge, mutual help, cooperative work and common property” (Dardot & Laval, 2009, as cited in Pennycook, 2018, p. 138, emphasis in original), as a site of struggle and resistance. Further, he focuses on some examples of humanist assumptions that have informed much of the work in applied linguistics and ways to move beyond those. Finally, by considering the idea of the commons, he stresses the importance and need to take Indigenous knowledge seriously, as it can help us open up possibilities to understand the world around us differently as well as attenuate and hopefully deconstruct divisions created between humans and non-human others by humanist perspectives.

This is a thought-provoking book, which involves a wide range of topics and contemporary concerns. As many issues and different perspectives are treated, some discussions are briefer and less detailed than others, and a reader with less knowledge about some of the themes approached might have to resort to other sources to understand some elements. Much of the discussion is supported and exemplified from Pennycook’s life experiences and work, which aid in understanding concepts throughout the book. The

contribution of it is invaluable to the field of applied linguistics as the author seeks to address, expand, and shift our understandings of ourselves, of non-human others, and especially of language, from a posthumanist perspective. This introductory book presents and develops initial ideas about several aspects related to language, and, thus, incites the undertaking of further research into specific areas within the field such as language education, teacher education, literacy studies, and translation studies to name a few.

References

- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward and understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801-831. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>
- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128>
- Dardot, P., & Laval, C. (2009). *La nouvelle raison du monde: Essai sur la Société néolibérale*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- Wade, N. (2009). The search for a sixth sense: The cases for vestibular, muscle and temperature senses. In D. Howes (Ed.), *The sixth sense reader* (pp. 55-86). Oxford: Berg.

