The sociolinguistics of hope: Unsettling language, affect, and agency

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Sociolinguistics has recently turned to affect as an entry point to unearth individuals' local subjective and bodily (re)actions within larger societal discourses. However, affect and agency tend to be seen as separate realms of social action. To a certain extent, this is so because affect is usually seen as a product of meaning-making practices instead of being understood as inherently constitutive of them. This panel aims to unpack the affective dimensions of agency and the agentive character of affect. To do so, the papers turn their analytical focus to the politics of hope within contemporary formations of violence, inequality, neoliberalism and coloniality. Hope, despite its pervasiveness across social groups, has been undertheorized (Crapanzano, 2003). Bloch (1986), for example, defines hope as an anticipation of the future. His understanding poses a challenge: how can sociolinguists, as analysts of the materiality of language, capture hope as an analytical category if it has a "tendency to slip away from the realm of the specific" (Miyazaki, 2006:149)? An alternative is to see it as a "radical reorientation of knowledge" (Miyazaki, 2004:5) and of situated action. The papers in this panel show that sociolinguistics may provide a privileged perspective for unpacking the "discursive and metadiscursive range of hope" (Crapanzano, 2003:4) and be analytically enriched by hope's forward-looking indexical potential. The papers in this panel provide ethnographically-grounded sociolinguistic detail to understand hope as a crucial dimension of human agency. By investigating the creative ways individuals design to survive in violent contexts of political and subjective destruction, the papers in the panel aim to give empirical detail to an understanding of hope as the sociolinguistic-ideological work by means of which individuals oppose violence and inequalities by collectively devising discursive and metadiscursive perspectives of survival and flourishing within otherwise debilitating contexts.

Keywords: hope; affect, sociolinguistics, metapragmatics, agency

1. Things fall apart: On the dialectics of hope-anger (in our [revolutionary?] times)

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Hope is an emotion that articulates a desire for change; it encourages people to act by allowing them to imagine future possibilities. In his 2019 State of the Nation address, President Cyril Ramaphosa celebrated hope, describing South Africa as a place that, through its Constitution, 'gives hope to the hopeless', and he affirmed his own hopefulness: 'I am hopeful'. Commenting on the state of South African politics, Sisonke Msimang (2019) dares to disagree: 'it would be a lie to suggest that I am hopeful', and Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) reminds us of the importance of being 'open to things falling apart', rather than loosing ourselves in a hope that risks ignoring 'the tenacity of injustice'.

Just before Ramaphosa's election as president, South Africa witnessed a series of protests in the country's urban ghettos. Stephen Friedman (2019) writing about these protests notes people's 'anger' at the daily injustices they face; he does not mention hope, not even once, but concludes rather dryly that 'poor people have been on the streets for more than forty years' – and one might add, have fought colonialism and capitalism for many centuries.

There exists a dialectic of hope and anger. Hope is a socially sanctioned emotion in liberal democracies, grounded in Western philosophy. Anger is an an emotion that is frowned upon and discouraged; it is what the Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar (1989) called an 'outlaw emotion'. However, anger has liberatory potential: it is epistemologically subversive and can play a role in social change (including revolutionary change). In this paper, I reflect on hope-anger by drawing on interviews with South Africans as well as media and social media commentary, analyzing expressions of hope and anger in discourse and meta-discourse. With capitalism (possibly) in its morbid stages, it is important for to sharpen our conceptual tools.

Keywords: affect/emotion, hope, anger, sociolinguistics-of-protest, feminist theory

2. #ColouredExcellence: Recalibrating 'colouredness' through affect and new media

Mx. Zaib Toyer & Dr. Amiena Peck
University of the Western Cape

South Africa's apartheid legacy is well-documented and in many ways portrays an immutable racial heirachization arguably sustained long after the first democratic elections in 1994. A critique of the 'rainbow nation' has been that many disenfranchised people of colour remain trapped in apartheid urban planning and have for the most part been left out of key conversations regarding transformation. However, one space which offers some degree of equanimity, agency and voice is that of the virtual space, specifically the social networking sites, FaceBook and Twitter. It is in these spaces that hope manifests itself through novel representations of colouredness which circulated promptly after an athlete of colour broke a world Olympic record. As southern sociolinguists interested in the multifaceted positions taken up under –and often in opposition – to the apartheid 'coloured' construct, we now turn to trending hashtags to understand novel recalibrations of colouredness within the burgeoning new affective economy online. Hashtags are thus seen as situated acts of identity which serve as shells for contemporary recalibrations of coloured identity. In particular, we are interested in the discursive strategies employed by users when including #ColouredExcellence for their posts. Drawing on Ahmed's (2004) Affective Economy, we explore how hashtags (inclusive of texts, images and videos) circulate, clash and complement one another as 'coloureds' grapple with their own identity in a post-apartheid context. By providing a meta-discursive analysis on the representation of 'coloureds' in the virtual context, we argue that Ahmed's works allows us to problematize what we deem as the 'coloniality of inclusion' amongst the world's sporting elites as well as the need to explore the virtual affective economy created by and through hashtags.

Keywords: race, affect, new media

3. A fellowship of hope: Race, gender and contra-colonialism at a university

Dr. Joana Plaza Pinto
Federal University of Goiás

In this paper, I discuss how an informal fellowship – a chain of friendship and camaraderie – provides linguistic conditions of mutual hospitality among quota black students. During an ethnographic research on linguistic ideologies, bodies, and (trans)national migration, I learned from migrant students, mostly coming from state northeast rural areas, how they face racism, sexism, and graphocentrism in academic practices and university bureaucracy. The liberal official quotas do not include mechanisms "to overcome difficulties", as the students demand. Au contraire, many obstacles endure long enough to stop them to accomplish their performative trick – when words are not enough to do things, or when words are not permit to certain bodies to do things. To debate the formation of this informal fellowship, I explore Povinelli's discussion on hope as a decision to persevere and fight despite all the exhausting arrangements, an ineffective yet persistent performative. The students support each other to persevere and expand their network to flourish in a hostile environment. Language practices are the cornerstone of the obstacles and the hope: while they recognize the perversity of liberal communication model as an inequal practice which commands interactions at main academic spaces, they also recognize the urgent work of their anti-colonial communication model as endurance practice which strengthens interactions at some academic spaces. To conclude, I discuss Bispo dos Santos's contra-colonialist position against graphocentrism. He traces the historical thread from the dismantle and compulsorily replace of black communities' knowledges to the imposition of academic knowledge in written language as the only opportunity to improve their living conditions. By dealing with this perverse university heritage, black quota students recycle their affects (suffering and hope) back and forth – in reaffirming their historical bounds and obligations, and in addressing differently their own exhaustions.

Keywords: ace, gender, language ideologies, contra-colonialism

4. Community libraries: Territories of hope and resignification

Dr. Adriana Carvalho Lopes
Federal University Of Rural Rio De Janeiro

In contemporary Brazil, community libraries have played an important role in the formation of readers around the country, especially in the urban peripheries, marked by poor urban infrastructure and low rates of public and private investment in education. Resulting from a historical struggle that linked popular education and social movements in Brazil, the National Network of Community Libraries (Rede Nacional de Bibliotecas Comunitárias - RBNC) began acting in 2009 in a coordinated and articulated manner, more than 120.000 people. Focusing on reading and writing activities, this network aims to reach Brazilian regions with high levels of poverty and illiteracy. In this talk, I couch the understandings of library literacy agents of these spaces as territories of dialogue, formation, transformation, and political struggle in Paulo Freire's rationalizations about a "Pedagogy of Hope." For Freire, hope is not an "emotional state of positive feeling" (Myazaki, 2004, p.5), or simply an expectation, but an "ontological necessity" (Freire, 1999) grounded in social practices and in the concrete struggle of the oppressed. I present the data that I generated in the course "Literacies and Human Rights". Drawing from materials produced in the course and fragments of oral narratives by library literacy agents, I show how the subjects of community libraries articulate new repertoires and new forms of action as responses to old Brazilian demands of Popular Education (Ghon, 2012). In other words, traditional claims of social movements that see reading and writing as a human right are connected with the struggle for the resignification of peripheral territories, the recognition of social differences, and the acknowledgment of the multiplicity of contemporary writings that challenge neoliberal and elitist values historically embedded in Brazilian education.

Keywords: pedagogy of hope, literacies, community libraries, territory, periphery

5. Hope, affect, and agency: A sociolinguistic analysis of queer encounters in Cambodia

Dr. Ben Rowlett
Hong Kong Baptist University

In this paper I engage with an understanding of hope as it constitutes and shapes the affective dimensions of agency, demonstrated by multilingual young men who work in the queer spaces of a tourist city in Cambodia. Specifically, this is via an empirical focus on the actions taken by these men to improve their lives and prospects. This is by forming relationships with the globally mobile gay visitors they serve within these spaces; relationships that are locally defined as 'sponsorship' arrangements. Although such actions run the risk of bringing to the fore prevalent and stigmatizing discourses of sex work often associated with globally southern contexts, I will show, by means of an ethnographically-grounded sociolinguistic analysis of their accounts, how these men are able to agentically challenge and reshape such discourses. This is primarily by constructing and performing affective selves that are 'worthy' of support, thus making an ethical case for their actions. With respect to the focus of this panel, the analysis will explore how their lived experiences of social and financial deprivation, born from this particular socio-historical context, may be collectively re-constituted through language towards an imagining of hope. Most importantly, I will attend to how this is constructed as a shared hope; an active affect binding the local and the visitor from which the possibility of a better future emerges. As such, I suggest that it is within this post/neo-colonial site of engagement, in queer encounters between the local and the visitor, that we can see language being used strategically and creatively to counter debilitating circumstances, identities and inequalities, and to ultimately effect change. I therefore conclude by examining how the sociolinguistics of hope may provide us with a significant degree of analytical purchase towards making sense of affect and agency in this and similar contexts.

Keywords: Cambodia, queer, tourism, affect, agency

6. Performing hope, agency and affect in narratives told by Brazilian mothers of Zika-stricken babies

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Social experiences involving adversities and hardships are fertile loci for the investigation of the relationship between agency and affect. Such moments may trigger a modus operandi that is neither transparent nor straightforward. It is affective, interpellating people by affect rather than by emotion. In this paper I support this claim theoretically and empirically. Concerning the former, I make recourse to Brian Massumi (2002) for whom affect is a kind of autonomous intense state that precedes linguistic rationalizations, not being "logically connected" to any semiotic order (p. 24). Affect is thus equated with intensity to characterize experiences in which the body responds to different stimuli by vibrating intensionally. I also develop these ideas by exploring narratives told by mothers of babies born with microcephaly – a Zika-related syndrome – in a documentary produced by a Brazilian anthropologist. They are young, black and economically vulnerable and the stories they tell deal with strong emotional content. The analysis of their talk draws on the notion of scale to scrutinize the complex semiotic labor they engage in as they reconstruct their pregnancies and their daily battle against the tragedy that has hit their lives. In spite of the suffering involved, they perform agency and survival, delineating hope as a kind of affective (re)action that brings along intensified transformational possibilities.

Keywords: affect, agency, hope, scale, intensity

7. The sociolinguistics of radical hope: How Marielle Franco's movement has engaged with reality

Dr. Daniel Silva
Federal University of Santa Catarina

In *Radical Hope*, Lear rephrases the questions about hope that Kant addresses in Critique of Pure Reason. Kant asks: "What can I know? and What I ought to do?" For Lear, "these questions are better transposed to the first-person plural" (p. 103). In delineating how the Crow people faced the cultural devastation predicated in their confinement to a reservation by the U.S. government, Lear argues that the Crow, in the face of the destruction of their cultural framework, refused to give in to despair. Instead of being merely optimistic, they adhered to a radical hope, molded under the authority of their leader, Plenty Coups. Through the realization of loss and the working out of semiotic resources such as collective interpretation of dreams and imaginations of alternative futures, Plenty Coups managed to transform the destruction of a telos into a teleological suspension of the ethical" (p. 146). Instead of short-circuiting reality in his dream visions, Plenty Coups engaged with reality in practical ways. In this talk, I look at a similar collective elaboration about the collapse of a form of life. In 2018, Marielle Franco, a queer black councilwoman in Rio de Janeiro was assassinated. Even though Marielle's murder was meant to destroy a personal life that iconized the lives of thousands of others in Rio de Janeiro and Brazil – that is, queer Afro-Brazilian women living in the peripheries –, a giant movement of mourning and realization quickly emerged in Rio and other cities around the world. New forms of imagining the circulation and use of language and other semiotic resources have surfaced in this movement, thus signaling to practical forms of coping and engaging with reality. This talk is aimed at describing these sociolinguistic resources and highlighting their significance in the rise of reactionary right-wing populism in Brazil.

Keywords: radical hope, sociolinguistic imagination, Marielle Franco

8. Cruel optimism in the 2016 US presidential election

Dr. Jerry Lee
University of California, Irvine

The election of the Donald Trump as President of the US in 2016 represented a moment of impending hopelessness for many in the US, ranging from ethnic minorities, religious minorities, members of the LGBTQ community, undocumented immigrants, and citizens of the lower and lower-middle classes. However, the months following the indirect election on 6 November 2016 to the inauguration date of 20 January 2017 reflected an unprecedented amount of hope in the possibility that Trump would be the first presidential candidate since Thomas Pinckney in 1796 to fail to be officially inaugurated as president via the Electoral College vote. In the end, there were only 7 "faithless" electors out of the 538 members of the Electoral College and Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the US with 304 votes, defeating Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, who received only 227 votes.

While Trump did eventually win the election, this presentation aims to understand the discourse that circulated between the indirect election and the inauguration as an important case study in the sociolinguistics of hope. Drawing on a corpus of data ranging from op-ed articles to social media posts published during this time period, I analyze the discourse from the perspective of what Berlant (2011) terms cruel optimism, or a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." In particular, the discourse leading up to the inauguration anticipated a transgression from the established expectations of political protocol (e.g., faithless electors who would alter the outcome of the election) but nonetheless within the realm of political possibility (e.g., impeachment). This presentation will examine how the very anticipation of various forms of transgression within the parameters of the political as such discursively produced not hope but instead inadvertently reproduced the conditions of hopelessness.

Keywords: cruel optimism, hopelessness, US elections