

## The politics of future re-imagination: Towards a sociolinguistics of utopias/dystopias

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This panel aims to explore the role of language, (meta)semiosis, and narration in the re-imagining of alternative futures. It engages with scholarly debates that have turned a general sense of despair about rising inequalities into a new research focus on “radical hope” (Lear, 2008). Away from accounts of inequality as merely (re)produced and resisted in/through daily life, this research centres around the act of re-imagining alternative worlds as a powerful practice of refusal (Simpson, 2007) and the study of collective forms of action whereby social actors attempt to introduce alternative social logics (De Angelis & Harvie, 2019).

In sociolinguistics, Heller & McElhinny (2017, pp. 252-257) provide a roadmap to radical hope and invite us to pay closer attention to commoning practices that reclaim material and immaterial commons turned into commodities in various contexts, including certain language varieties, practices or registers (see, for instance, Cameron 2000). This call for a sociolinguistics of *commoning* asks us to critically re-evaluate the role that our own discipline plays in the (re)constitution of the struggles that we ourselves try to understand. Martín-Rojo (2019) also documents how informants’ narrated futures may imagine alternatives to neoliberal logics through “counter-conducts” and “practices of self-transformation” (p.184). She claims that resistance to neoliberalism cannot be individual and requires an alternative discourse that allows new subjectivities.

The papers in this panel adopt an ethnographic perspective to the situated production, circulation, valuation and enactment of meanings, social categories and subjectivities involved in the imagining of utopias and dystopias under late capitalist conditions. We propose investigating collective projects of future re-imagining as a discursive terrain for examining contradictions and subsequent forms of dispossession that may also be enabled by such projects, and considering the ways in which sociolinguistic knowledge production also contributes to re-imagining the future of our own discipline.

**Keywords:** re-imagining; commons; utopia; dystopia; narrative

## **1. Solidarity as a keyword in a social movement: Navigating contradictions in commoning practices and narratives of alternative futures**

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This paper mainly aims to investigate the different interpretations of solidarity as a keyword (Williams, 1976) in narratives of alternative futures in a social movement characterised by commoning. This “solidarity-based movement” explicitly seeks to give hope to desperate people and to fight for social justice in live-in “communities”. These self-sustained communities engage in commoning practices in the organisation of daily life (e.g. meals), cooperative recycling work (e.g. rotas) and solidarity projects locally and abroad. Drawing on ethnographic observations of assemblies and meetings, interviews with residents and circulating documents, I will explore the different functions and material consequences of the narratives of solidarity projecting alternative futures in two local communities ideologically vested in this movement. The localised narratives inspired by the broader mission construct different forms of commoning, namely, “within capital”, based on economic growth, individual activation and solidarity as charity, and “beyond capital”, in anti-capitalist movements reclaiming immaterial commons and emphasising horizontal relations as solidarity (De Angelis and Harvie, 2019). Given that these holistic communities blur the public and the private, these commoning spaces socialise members into ways of behaving and speaking that involve practices of self-transformation that might create forms of dispossession through nation-state technologies of citizenship (Inda, 2006) and/or forms of hope for individuals that engage in “counter-conducts” through social activism (Martín-Rojo, 2019). My academic gaze focuses on the former aspect of social inequality and dispossession to the detriment of the latter, i.e. narratives of utopia and counter-conducts in the movement. Thus, I will consider participants’ narratives and “small victories” over the dominant neoliberal logics in both charity-oriented and anti-capitalist appropriations of solidarity. The two collectivities’ projected futures can help re-imagine the role of critical sociolinguistics in the (re)production and transformation of the contradictory logics in the terrains that we seek to understand.

**Keywords:** *narrative, social movements, solidarity, commoning, ethnography*

## 2. Feminismo villero: class, gender and race in Argentina's feminist movement

Dr. Veronica Pajaro

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*The Argentinian feminist collective Ni una menos (not one [woman] less) has gained international attention over the past years for their highly profiled activism for women's rights in the country. Behind this movement and notoriety, lay years of grassroots militancy from a myriad of feminist collectives, mobilizing diverging agendas rooted in their own bodies and experiences. In this paper, I will look into a feminist movement that emerged from marginalized, informal housing projects built on fiscal lands in and around the city of Buenos Aires, el feminismo villero (feminism from the slums), and the subject position(s) imagined and/or reclaimed through their activism.*

*El feminismo villero fronts an intersectional feminist agenda (Yuval-Davis, 2006) for and by the women from las villas (the slums), thus advocating for reproductive rights alongside access to basic water and sewer services, and food banks in their neighborhoods. In this sense, their feminist struggle is situated in and emerges from the precarious living and working conditions in la villa, which is then condensed in a project of reconstitution of the territory of la villa as a barrio (neighborhood), and the repositioning of las villeras (slumdweller) as vecinas (neighbors).*

*I will argue that through this discursive movement, the feminismo villero creates a space of possibility for reclaiming a political subjectivity that has historically been both the object of governmental discourses and invisibilized by white, middle-class feminism: the poor, migrant, dark, precarious, women of Buenos Aires. Moreover, within the colonial heritage that imagines Argentina as an inherently white space (Alberto & Elena, 2016), I see this form of feminist activism as a powerful act of re-imagination that can allow me to think, talk, and theoretically articulate my own heritage, as well as the complex intersections between class and race that have historically been white-washed and silenced.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, intersectionality, race, Argentina, colonialism.*

### 3. Hope, spiritual commoning and global circuits of labor

*Dr. Miguel Pérez-Milans*

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*Dr. Xiaoyan Guo*

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This paper focuses on the circulation of young professionals as they move from China to enroll in higher education in the UK, and then return to Beijing to work in diverse sectors. We discuss the case of those who convert to Christianity in the process, after engaging with evangelical Christian organizations during their studies in the UK, a salient trend in China as these professionals cope with a general state of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their experiences at university and the workplace. In so doing, we explore how the circulation of returnees is entrenched with larger dynamics of inequality that are enabled and sustained by affective technologies of hope (Ahmed, 2010) embedded into materialized configurations of space. As part of wider global circuits (Sassen, 2001) or infrastructure spaces (Esterling, 2016) that involve various geographical regions (e.g., China and the UK) and institutions (e.g., higher education, NGOs, the labor market), such affective logics channel the circulation and valuation of meanings, knowledge, and labor, in ways that regulate mobility and citizenship within China. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork with returnees in Beijing, we show how these logics are anchored in the institutional production, circulation and valorization of meanings of hope for a successful return that are emblematically linked to the figure of the returnee, thus creating the conditions under which individuals engage in semiotic practices of self-transformation. Though these self-governing practices often contribute to capitalist projects of market expansion, in this paper we examine more closely the complex ways in which they can also help constitute spaces of common aid, or “commoning” (Polany, 2001), whereby social actors are invested in the making of alternative futures.

**Keywords:** Hope; returnees; Christian conversion; subjectivation; spiritual commoning; China

#### 4 English as hope in the life plan of young Catalan students

*Prof. Adriana Patiño-Santos*

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The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which a group of secondary school students, from the Pinetree school in Catalonia, engage with the potential role of English for their *life projects* (du Bois-Reymond 1998) and the commitments that such an engagement imposes upon them. The school, like many others located in working class areas in Spain, implemented English as the vehicular language for some “basic content areas”, which has been interpreted, amongst others, as a way to create a workforce able to meet the demands of a globalised labour market (Martín Rojo 2013). Such an interpretation gains credibility on observing the considerable number of young Spanish migrants who left the country between 2008-2013 as a consequence of the economic crash of 2008 (Dominguez-Mujica, et al. 2016).

By drawing on *Radical Hope Ethics* (Lear 2006), I will claim that the still perceived socioeconomic instability, the experiences of these students with English and their participation (or not) in the English programme launched by their school are shaping the possibilities for them to: i) imagine who they want to be in the future (e.g. a particular sort of person who embodies certain ideals), as well as ii) their narrative construction of “speaking English” as one of the *standards of excellence* that they associate with such imagined subjectivities. For some, English becomes the passport to the utopian future of their imaginations, despite the fact that yet greater numbers are now returning home, having confronted a reality abroad that did not measure up to their dream (López Trujillo 2018).

The data for this paper was gathered in 6 focus groups, informed by a long-term team multi-sited ethnography (FFI2014-54179-C2-1-2015-2018). It consists of the school biographies of 19 students (age 15-16), who need to make decisions about their immediate career paths.

**Keywords:** *English, young people, life project, Radical Hope, subjectivity*

## 5. Praying for rain in the ethnolinguistic desert: Palestinian multilingual enactment of a hoped-for liberal state

*Dr. Nancy Hawker*

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Israel's colonial-like policy of Hebrew monolingual hegemony has instituted an Arabic drought. Some Palestinian politicians are enacting visions of a liberal state where dignity and autonomy would be universally respected. By performing multilingualism in Hebrew and Arabic on official platforms, they are somehow heralding that future, like praying for rain by dancing under the sprinkler. The ground gets watered, and if enough people prayed in this way, it would be as if it had rained. But a mere sprinkler will not slake desires for emancipation from Hebrew dominance like a proper storm would (Suleiman 2011).

Beyond deconstructing emancipatory political discourse (Cameron 1995), the paper contributes to theories of transformation of the state. While rising ethnonationalisms have been challenging ethnorepublican structures in many places including Israel (Peled 1992), the liberal alternative is inhibited. Language policies align on the three sides: ethnorepublicanism – managed linguistic diversity; ethnonationalism – purism; liberalism – pluralism (Gal 2012). Late capitalism introduces ownership of (multi)linguistic resources as a factor on the liberal side of the triangle. Could late capitalism somehow cultivate the discursive seeds of dignity and autonomy?

I will present instances both historical and recent where Arabic and Hebrew were mobilised by Palestinians for complex functions pertaining to the legitimacy of their political vision. The examples are based on linguistic anthropological fieldwork in 2015 among parliamentary candidates for the Israeli parliament, and research in parliamentary archives, yielding more than 57 hours of scripted and unscripted speech. My analysis proposes that late-capitalist processes need to be considered in terms of class and nationality, distinguishing an aspiring Palestinian multilingual elite set to benefit, relatively, from liberalism (Heller & McElhinny 2017:251).

And if I join in the rain dance, is it because I am a liberal visionary, or a typical language knowledge worker who is positively predisposed towards multilingualism?

**Keywords:** *multilingualism – Israel – Arabic – Palestine – postcolonialism*