



MEDIATING DISCOURSE IN A GLOBALISING WORLD: ANALYSING THE LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICES OF TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION

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Social and political theory has taken a decidedly 'global' turn in recent years, resulting in a sustained critique of our conceptualisations of 'society' and the 'nation-state'. Social theorists ask us to refocus on, for example, transnationality, global orderings, hybrid collectives, flows, mobilities and networks. Given that (critical) applied linguistics draws upon and informs social theory in a variety of ways, we are thus compelled to ask what new possibilities there are for applied language and discourse studies as a result of contemporary social and political theorising. My contribution to this crucial debate is illustrated by considering the exemplary yet diffracted case of transnational adoption. Transnational adoption comprises a nexus of local and global practices which are mediated in, through and across talk, text and other modalities of discourse. My concern is with how the 'child-to-be-adopted' is figured as a quasi-object, a heterogeneous assemblage of biology and culture, and thus how its origin, identity and agency is performatively distributed across the social and discursive field.

Keywords: mediated discourse, globalisation, critical applied linguistics, transnational adoption

1 INTRODUCTION

Now is the time to push familiar methodologies - for example, in applied linguistics, critical discourse analysis and conversation analysis - in new directions to cope with the uneven impact of globalisation, mobility, new media and the so-called 'knowledge society'. Our lives are increasingly interconnected with actors of all scales across the planet, and these relationships and collectivities are mediated in new ways. Moreover, we know this is happening, and our attempt to understand how and why reflexively shapes our interactions and practices in ways that are inimical to globalisation itself. No longer can we restrain ourselves to look at 'texts' as transmission containers for 'dominant ideologies' without regard to their circulation and uptake. No longer can we examine the 'local ordering' of a single conversation when the participants

themselves do not recognise the scale of 'local' (or 'micro') as wholly constitutive of their interactions. In fact, text and context, micro and macro, actor and structure, as well as local and global, are all problematic dualisms that often hinder our understanding of sociocultural ordering. This paper attempts to give some perspective to recent sociopolitical theories that may help us to rethink our methods and tools of analysis, as well as to discover new phenomena, while we follow the circulation of actors and mediated discourses.

My contribution to this crucial debate is illustrated by considering the exemplary yet diffracted case of transnational adoption. Transnational adoption comprises a nexus of local and global practices which are mediated in, through and across talk, text and other modalities of discourse. For instance, a host of discourses and contingent practices of care and kinship are heterogeneously assembled to 'translate' a child from one familial 'place' or nexus of practice in the world to another, crossing linguistic, sociocultural, kinship, racial, class and national boundaries in the process. My concern is with how the 'child-to-be-adopted' is figured as a quasi-object, a heterogeneous assemblage of biology and culture, and thus how its origin, identity and agency is performatively distributed across the social and discursive field.

In this short paper, I introduce Alastair Pennycook's (2001) notion of *critical applied linguistics*, which I take as the most theoretically rich and promising critique of applied linguistics. Then I outline some of what I understand to be the key theoretical developments and concepts in contemporary sociopolitical and globalisation theory that impact on our own theories, methods and tools. Following that I sketch the theory and methods of mediated discourse analysis (MDA), which I feel offers a working framework for dealing with some of the issues sketched out in this paper. The last part of this paper illustrates what can be gained by using MDA to analyse the mediated discourses of transnational adoption in a globalising world. By using and extending mediated discourse analysis, I suggest how we might begin to analyse how adopters publicly narrate their own experiences and problems with adopting their children, as well as how they construct their personal websites, network with others locally and internationally, orient to other 'sites' or sources of information, share advice and create immaterial and communicative 'public goods'.

2 CRITICAL APPLIED LINGUISTICS

In looking for a sophisticated theory of applied linguistics that can address some of the issues I have raised above, it is Alastair Pennycook's

(2001) revisioning of critical applied linguistics (CALx) that stands out.¹ He complains that work currently being undertaken in critical domains related to critical applied linguistics often falls into the category of *emancipatory modernism*, and thus he sees an intellectual conservatism manifested in those approaches (cf. Fairclough 2003b). Instead, following Foucault, one should engage in a 'problematizing' practice because "it is unwilling to accept the taken-for-granted components of our reality and the 'official' accounts of how they came to be the way they are" (Dean 1994: 4; see also Howarth 2005). For Pennycook (2003: 7), critical applied linguistics "is not about developing a set of skills that will make the doing of applied linguistics more rigorous, more objective, but about making applied linguistics more politically accountable." Following Appadurai's (1996) classification of global flows and scapes - eg. ethnoscares, mediascares, technoscares, finanscares and ideoscares - Pennycook (2003) suggestively proposes an additional scape, viz. the *linguascapes* of global flows, a concept that moves language and discourse to centre stage in studies of globalisation.²

The strengths of CALx include its critique of the conservatism and narrowness of applied linguistics and the false promises of emancipatory modernism, but it has its own weaknesses and blind spots. For instance, if the modulation and assimilation of 'difference' is indeed indicative of Empire or imperial sovereignty, as Hardt & Negri (2000) argue, then Pennycook's version of CALx will itself be easily assimilated by Empire, as will liberal multiculturalism and other approaches that romantically valorise 'difference' as resistance (or 'connectivity' as collectivity). In order to find alternative ways forward, the next section gives a brief overview of recent sociopolitical theory.

3 CONTEMPORARY SOCIOPOLITICAL THEORY AND SOME OF ITS CONCERNS

Social and political theory has taken a decidedly 'global' turn in recent years, resulting in a sustained critique of our conceptualisations of 'society' and the 'nation-state'. Social theorists ask us to refocus on, for example, transnationality, global orderings, hybrid collectives, flows, mobilities and networks (see Gane 2004). Given that (critical) applied

¹ Other approaches that come to mind are critical discourse analysis, critical sociolinguistics, critical literacy, and critical language awareness. Other speculative methods include nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon 2004), critical membership categorisation awareness (cp. Stokoe 2003), critical realism (Sealey & Carter 2004) and positive discourse analysis or discourses of hope (Martin 1999, 2004).

² One thing to note at this point is that language and discourse, and their constitutive nature, are, of course, what interest us in this inter/transdisciplinary enterprise. For instance, Fairclough (2003a) contends that language has a more significant role in contemporary socio-economic changes than it had in the past. He notes that while the sociologists Bourdieu & Wacquant (2001) do acknowledge the performative character of the 'new planetary vulgate' in new capitalism, they need the contribution of discourse analysts in order to go beyond the listing of vocabulary that they engage in. We need to analyse texts and interactions to show how some effects of neoliberal discourse are brought off. But, as some scholars warn, we need to be cautious about being too sycophantic or myopic in our interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary choices (see Coupland 2003; Blommaert 2003).

linguistics draws upon and informs social theory in a variety of ways, we are thus compelled to ask what new possibilities there are for applied language studies and discourse studies as a result of contemporary social and political theorising. Thus, we might query what the consequences are of taking seriously the transformations in scale, complexity, connectivity, collectivity, participation, extensity, mediation, agency and communicative labour that we are witnessing globally. With the emergence of a new sociocultural order of globalisation (or Empire), we need to refigure how we understand 'discourse', 'power', 'identity' and 'action' in relation to the post-national. And then we must consider in what ways we can 'apply' our methods and findings to participate or intervene in existing mediated practices, and to what effect. My argument and strategy is that there are many new developments and currents in contemporary sociopolitical theory, and that it is healthy that we pay critical attention to them. We may reuse the concepts we find, or we may use their broad scopes to guide us where to look for linguistic and discursive phenomena that we have hitherto overlooked or have been incapable of analysing. Or we can help furnish better accounts of phenomena than the sociopolitical theorist can manage on their own. In this paper I will briefly outline some of the currents of thought - such as actor-network theory and virtual ethnography - that I feel are most pertinent and challenging, as well as some of the most salient transformations, viz. governmentality and Empire.

3.1 ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY

The concept of 'network' has become a pervasive figure in Western technophilic cultures, as well as in sociocultural, biological and computer systems theory.³ Some argue that we have moved from hierarchical tree systems to decentralised command and control, and now to network power, a new form of technical control. Indeed, the notion of *network* is increasingly used in discourse studies. For example, according to Fairclough (2003a: 30, my emphasis), "complex modern societies involve the *networking* together of different social practices across different domains or fields of social life (eg. the economy, education, family life) and across different scales of social life (global, regional, national, local). Texts are a crucial part of these *networking* relations - the orders of discourse associated with *networks* of social practices specify chaining and *networking* relationships between types of text."

Instead of the panopticon of a disciplinary episteme, following Foucault, the network is the new diagram of power. Latour (1999) argues that "modern societies cannot be described without recognizing them as

³ Thacker (2004) suggestively explores the relations between the technological model of *networks*, the biological model of *swarms*, and the political model of *multitudes*. He points out that, as a consequence of thinking of networks, swarms and multitudes, we need to reconsider many terms that are central to political thought — power, right, and democracy — and in turn, the philosophical issues of individuation, multiplicity, and materiality.

having a fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary character that is never captured by the notions of levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structure, systems.” Following this principle, actor-network theory (ANT) has radically transformed our understanding of actors, agency, mediation and technology, providing a sustained challenge to any conception of ‘the social’ that is populated only by rational human actors (Latour 1993, 1999, 2005). Surprisingly, Latour (2003: 40) notes that ANT is a direct descendant of Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology: “one could say that it is a hybridisation of Garfinkel for humans and Greimas [semiotics] for nonhumans.” Nevertheless, Callon & Latour (1981: 284) argue that “ethnomethodologists forgot to include in their analyses the fact that ambiguity of context in human societies is partially removed by a whole gamut of tools, regulations, walls and objects of which they only analyse a part. We must now gather up what their analysis leaves out and examine with the same method the strategies which enlist bodies, materials, discourses, techniques, feelings, laws, organisations.” The social is better understood as composed of and constituted by connections and it is these connections that social theorists should explain.⁴ Actors, not sociologists, build society through active construction and maintenance of (dis)connections between humans and non-humans (Latour 2004). There is no recourse to unaccountable, empirically elusive categories such as ‘macro’, ‘micro’, ‘global’, ‘institutional’, ‘organisational’ and ‘environmental’ as explanatory resources. Rather, these categories are what should be explained. Latour’s slogan might be: “It’s not the ability to be big, it’s the ability to be connected.” Thus, every place is as local as every other, and the circulation of objects between them is what is interesting. Thus, Latour (1996) argues all local interactions are framed, yet on the other hand, in the summing up of interactions there are no more than ‘local totalities’ (oligopolies) or ‘total localities’ (agencies).

Following the principle of symmetry, Callon (1991: 134) identifies an ‘intermediary’ as “anything passing between actors which defines the relationship between them” and “an actor is an intermediary that puts other intermediaries into circulation” (141). By combining this performative relational perspective with mediated discourse analysis’ (introduced below) focus on mediational means in social practices, a useful methodological tool is obtained which can track the circulation and assemblage of cultural tools across sites of engagement. Middleton & Brown (2001) look to Michel Serres’ (1980) writings on ‘thirdness’ (eg. notions of parasite, third person and noise). For them, following Serres and Latour, social relations are structured by *quasi-objects* — for example, assemblages such as the ‘infant-in-intensive-care’ or the ‘adoptive-child-to-be’ — which “are powerful, certainly, but they gain this power through their ability to lodge themselves in everyday

⁴ For Latour (2003: 36) one *traces* a network, “being not a thing in the world but the path traced by the researcher equipped with an ANT methodology during his explorations.”

interaction. They are objects inasmuch as one can point to them, describe them, evaluate them and so on. But because they are so important for interaction, they become in effect a kind of subject. That is, something to be negotiated and taken into account in a given interaction, something which might conceivably be accorded a form of agency.”

3.2 VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OR CONNECTIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

With the recent development of the networked society, virtual ethnography (Howard 2002; Hakken 1999 and Hine 2000) problematises the notion of ‘the social’ as populated by bounded locations and homogeneous groups who materially occupy the more ‘real’ off-line world in contrast to the immaterial ‘unreal’ on-line world. Instead, Hine (2000), Shields (2003) and others reject this dichotomy between what is often misunderstood as the ‘real’ versus the ‘virtual’. Hine (2000: 60) proposes that analysts refocus on *connectivity* and develop “a sensitivity to the ways in which place is performed and practised”, and to the “mobility across a heterogeneous landscape and the differential engagements which this enables and requires.” We should investigate further the making and re-making of space and time through mediated interactions. The Internet, however, offers weak entry and exit points into the ‘community’ or ‘collectivity’, and thus makes it difficult to produce an ethnographically ‘thick’ description. Moreover, it is tricky to uncover the practices of ‘going online’ when communication practices and mediated actions are de-contextualised, transient, distributed and mobile. Rather than selecting a territory, the researcher has to identify a ‘virtual’ nexus of practice and determine the important nodes, nodal events and edges/actions in the emerging social and discursive network (cp. Latour 2004).

Likewise, Marcus (1995) contends that since both the local and global exist within the same world system, then, they must be of the same system. Thus, distinctions made between the size, location or population of the site are irrelevant in tracing the impact of the local/global dichotomy upon a particular site. Marcus argues for the disciplinary recognition that the single-sited location for fieldwork can no longer suffice as the *modus operandi* of ethnologists due to contemporary global trends of trans-migration and displacement, and the shifting of social and political boundaries; instead, it must deal with traversals of diverse sites of practice. Marcus offers several strategies for ‘circumstantial activists’ to implement a multi-site ethnography as a methodology, which includes: *follow the people; follow the thing; follow the metaphor; follow the life or biography* — in addition to the strategically situated (single-site) ethnography. Strathern (1996) concurs and recommends that we follow connections in networks and see where they are cut in practice to limit the infinite extension of those networks –

this methodological move echoes that of nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon 2004).

3.3 GOVERNMENTALITY, CONTROL AND POWERS OF FREEDOM

According to Deleuze (1992), Foucault located the ‘disciplinary societies’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they reach their height at the outset of the twentieth. They initiate the organization of vast spaces of enclosure, and the individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another. He continues, “Foucault has brilliantly analyzed the ideal project of these environments of enclosure, particularly visible within the factory: to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time; to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces” (1992: 4). Deleuze recognizes that Foucault understood the transience of his model of societies of sovereignty and of disciplinarity. In the new form of societies of control there is a generalized crisis in relation to all the disciplinary environments of enclosure. The transformation from disciplinary societies to societies of control is sometimes characterised as a shift to governmentality.⁵ Rose (1999: 3) defines governmentality as “that dimension of our history composed by the invention, contestation, operationalisation and transformation of more or less rationalised schemes, programmes, techniques and devices which seek to shape conduct so as to achieve certain ends.” Governmentality has a complex relationship with democracy and freedom; indeed, to govern “is to presuppose the freedom of the governed” (4), that is, to act upon action. Rose recommends we “track force relations at the molecular level, as they flow through a multitude of human technologies, in all the practices, arenas and spaces where programmes for the administration of others intersect with techniques for the administration of ourselves” (5). Following Latour (eg. the ‘macro-actor’ is no different from the ‘micro-actor’), “we need to pay attention to the ways in which, in practice, distinctions and associations are established between practices and apparatuses deemed political and aimed at the management of large-scale characteristics of territories or populations, and micro-technologies for the management of human conduct in specific individuals in particular locales and practices” (5). Clearly, these transformations have great relevance to any theory of discourse or applied linguistics that has presumed a particular disciplinary notion of the social, of power and of the macro-micro distinction.

⁵ McKenzie (2001: 18) argues that “performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth, that is, an onto-historical formation of power and knowledge.”

3.4 EMPIRE

For Hardt & Negri (2000), Empire has no territorial centre of power, no fixed boundaries or barriers; it is decentred and deterritorialising. It is an apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers: hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies and plural exchanges. Once again we find a critique of the false dichotomy between the *local* — preserving natural heterogeneity and difference — and the *global* — entailing homogenisation and undifferentiated identity. Instead, we should see globalisation as a regime of the production of identity and difference, or really of homogenisation and heterogenisation. Thus, Hardt & Negri critique multiculturalism, liberalism and modernism, since their ‘progressive’ approach which celebrates ‘difference’ and multiculturalism is easily assimilated. Echoing Latour (network) and Deleuze (rhizome), they argue that “the better framework, then, to designate the distinction between the global and the local might refer to different networks of flows and obstacles in which the local moment or perspective gives priority to the reterritorializing barriers or boundaries and the global moment privileges the mobility of deterritorializing flows. It is false, in any case, to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense outside and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire” (45).

Interestingly, in their new book, Hardt & Negri (2004) noticeably emphasize that linguistic performance is a metaphor for new aspects of contemporary production, eg. immaterial labour. They assert that “language is always produced in common... created by a linguistic community in communication and collaboration... linguistic performance relies on the ability to innovate in changing environments based on past practices and habits... power to say... our power to speak is based in the common, that is, our shared language; every linguistic act creates the common; and the act of speech itself is conducted in common, in dialogue, in communication” (201). Virno (2003) argues that the contemporary organisation of labour appropriates and mobilizes human linguistic competence; thus, there is a strong link between economic and linguistic performativity.

3.5 SUMMARY

From this brief review of pertinent sociopolitical theories, a number of key concepts emerge, viz. network, complexity, connectivity, collectivity, scale, mobility, quasi-object, peer-to-peer and communicative labour. As a result I wish to begin to address the following concerns in relation to the study of applied linguistics and discourse:

- Given that communication practices and mediated actions are increasingly de-contextualised, transient, distributed, remediated, mobile, horizontalised yet asymmetric, then how can we address the theoretical, methodological and practical analysis of discourse in relation to: 1) action-at-a-distance, 2) networked agency, 3) collectivities, 4) cultural tools and technologisation, and 5) timescales and trajectories?
- How does one deal with ‘complexity’ and ‘virtuality’ in discourse data, method and theory?
- Is the concept of ‘network’ (or ‘nexus’, ‘mesh’, ‘multitude’) a useful technical concept for discourse studies? Can we go beyond one-dimensional linear and hierarchical models? eg. beyond tree structures, genre chains, ... but *not* end up with a reshaped social network analysis.

4 MEDIATED DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Following mediated discourse analysis (MDA), I prefer to shift the focus to investigating mediated action, action that is always mediated in significant ways for the participants (Scollon 2001a; McIlvenny & Raudaskoski 2005a, 2005b). It is urgent and timely that we work out ways to move beyond the analysis of spoken and written texts to consider questions about the actions people take with texts and other cultural tools and the social consequences these actions have. Because discourses come to have certain effects when they are engaged in specific actions, we need to track just how social actors produce and interpret intelligible action in recognisable ways. MDA and nexus analysis are critical responses to the dearth of research in the 1990s to address, among other things, the relations between discourse, practice, materiality and social action. In this paper I argue that exploring MDA in relation to approaches such as actor-network theory (ANT) and virtual ethnography as outlined above will be beneficial. MDA provides an important bridge between sociopolitical theory and the more textualist approaches to discourse.⁶

In one of the defining texts, Scollon (2001b: 3) argues that by looking at *mediated action* the focus is on “social actors *as they are acting* because these are the moments in social life when the Discourses in which we are interested are instantiated in the social world as social action, not simply as material objects”, though action is materially grounded in persons and objects. For him, a *site of engagement* is “the real-time window that is opened through an intersection of social practices and mediational means” (3-4). And a mediated action is carried out through material objects — including the materiality of social actors (bodies) — in dialectical relation with structures of bodily *habitus*

⁶ Scollon (2001b: 158) is fundamentally concerned with “how the transformation from practice, action, and habitus to person, characteristics, and identity is performed through discursive practices and other practices of technologisation and objectivisation.” We might compare his formulation to that of Foucault’s: “it is one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (1980: 60).

(Bourdieu) or the *historical body*. Actions carry with them historical affordances and constraints, so they are inherently polyvocal, intertextual and interdiscursive. *Cultural tools* are the technologisation of practice. In fact, there is “a necessary intersection of social practices and mediational means which in themselves reproduce social groups, histories and identities” (4). And, lastly, *nexus of practice* is a constellation of linked practices: “a number of social practices may intersect, never perfectly, never in any finalised matrix or latticework of regular patterns, but as a network which itself is the basis of the identities we produce and claim through our social actions” (142).⁷

With their recent work on *discourses in place* (*geosemiotics*), Scollon & Scollon (2003) argue that social action is accomplished at some material place in the world, in which some discourses/semiotics are foregrounded and others backgrounded for the social activity. And most recently, Scollon & Scollon (2004) develop their theory of *nexus analysis* in order to analyse *cycles of discourse* — to look beyond the nexus of practice to examine the discourses present and how they relate to past discourses and discourses which anticipate the future and extend beyond the site of engagement. They recommend establishing a zone of identification with a nexus of practice, a nexus in which you have or can take a place as an accepted legitimate participant, and to do so in order to change the nexus.

It is my view that MDA has an opportunity to draw together a variety of approaches to practices of mediation, the situated use of cultural tools and technologies, combined with richer conceptions of ‘the social’, mediation, connectivity and network, derived and refined from the sociopolitical theories introduced above. In the next section, the relevance of MDA will be illustrated.

5 WHAT IS TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION AND WHY IS IT INTERESTING?

My contribution to the issues raised above is illustrated by considering the exemplary yet diffracted case of transnational or intercountry adoption.⁸ Transnational adoption features regularly in the mass media, often spectacularly, yet the general public knows little about the processes and practices of this fairly recent phenomenon (since the second world war). In fact, the adoptive family is an intense site of inspection, an intersection of a whole range of medical, judicial, educational, psychological and linguistic practices. Through application procedures, social worker visits, obligatory courses, official adoption agencies and adoption associations, the child and the prospective

⁷ A linkage is a repeated coupling of two or more practices (Scollon 2001b: 147).

⁸ This research is part of a larger project with Pirkko Raudaskoski that explores how to track and understand the linguistic, discursive and sociocultural contact zones or networks brought about by intercountry adoption.

adoptive parent(s) are discursively constructed in a variety of ways, for example as a 'last resort' (for the child and/or the adopter) or a 'complete' family unit (shifting with the move to legalise single and gay/lesbian adopters).

A discourse studies approach to transnational adoption can investigate how the social issues and discourses of adoption are mediated in the actions and practices of different actors, for example of adoptive parents, institutions, birth parents, private agencies, and the child-to-be-adopted. McIlvenny & Raudaskoski (2005a, 2005b) are engaged in a 'multi-site' (or 'trans-site') ethnography (Marcus 1995; Hakken 1999), which follows the actants, the artefacts, the metaphors, the narratives, the life/biographies and the antagonisms in and across multiple 'sites' (and 'cites'). I do not have space in this paper to present a full analysis of the mediated discourses in transnational adoption. Instead, to illustrate the applicability of an MDA approach to applied linguistics, I will summarise some of the findings that make up a larger study of how prospective adoptive parents and children are represented and perform themselves in a fragmentary TV documentary series following five potential adopters, which was broadcast in 2003 by the main national public television network in Denmark (see Raudaskoski, this volume).

5.1 WEBSITES AND HOMEPAGES

Initially, we focused on prospective adoptive parents as they navigated through the complex process of intercountry adoption, while simultaneously mapping the ways in which 'the child-to-be-adopted' is resemiotised up until first physical contact between the adoptive parents and the adoptive child. In our research project, we have identified that many prospective adopters use the Internet to garner information, advice and contacts to help them through the adoption process and the institutional procedures. Some adopters establish semi-permanent web sites, which can be quite extensive. A corpus of personal websites and online discussion forums from different receiving countries has been collected, with a focus on their relationship to particular sending countries from a comparative perspective. It is particularly interesting to trace how adopters publicly narrate their own experiences and problems with adopting their children, as well as how they construct their personal websites, network with others locally and internationally, orient to other 'sites' or sources of information, share advice and create immaterial and communicative 'public goods'.

The (minority of) prospective adopters who start a website at some point in the adoption process may do it in the so-called pre-pregnancy or pregnancy phases (Howell 2003), or it may even appear in the form of a travelogue (or 'blog') during the trip to the sending country to pick up the child. Authors may continue to update the website, for particular audiences; however, after a period of time it may no longer be accessible

on the Internet and thus it may disappear from public view. On their websites, many adoptive parents create a bricolage of images, photographs, music, texts, documents, layouts, navigation systems and links, borrowing from here and there to create a semiotic aggregate (Lemke 2002; Scollon & Scollon 2003). The home(page) is not so much a place/space, but it consists of regular patterns of activity and structures in time (Morley 2000: 16). The practice of keeping websites, and especially diaries, is part of a patterning, a nexus of practice (Scollon 2001b), which also involves reporting on the home's patterns and structures.

5.2 'POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE': CONTESTED LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES

Among adoptive parents (and adoptees), there is clearly an awareness of and a strong emotional response towards the inappropriate behaviour of people who have little understanding of adoption, ie. those who can hurt the feelings of adoptive parents and adoptees in everyday or institutional encounters. Common attitudes to adoption are usually stereotypical and normative, and are often drawn from the mass media. When they give advice on appropriate language usage combined with anecdotal evidence of such encounters and guidance on how to solve 'the problem' or avoid the topic or encounter altogether, the parents signal their discomfort. Hence, parents are cognisant of the tactical importance of language in shaping sociocultural responses and actions. If one wishes to effect social change, then one strategy is to initiate a shift in the everyday use of concepts (mediational means), such that certain actions become thinkable, and thus doable, while others become unthinkable. Sometimes known facetiously as 'political correctness', Fairclough (2003c: 22) calls this a process of cultural and discursive intervention, which "attempts to change discourses on the assumption that changing discourses will, or may, lead to changes in other elements of social practices through processes of dialectical internalisation."

Many US American adoption support websites give practical, constructive advice on specific vocabulary and phrases to use that avoid what they see as the negative associations that adoption has in English. Unfortunately, in their recommendations to condone a particular usage on the grounds that it is offensive to adoptive parents and their families, the highly contested politics of adoption is often elided. The practice of attending to politically correct language usage is often termed "Respectful Adoption Language" or something similar by adopters. The advice is often given in the form of a two column list of appropriate and inappropriate language. An example would be 'birth parent', but not 'real parent'. The list constitutes a classificatory schema (structured as a set of binary categories) that attempts to 'de-biologise' the origins of the child,

diminish the role of the ‘birth’ mother/culture, and reduce the importance of ‘adoption’ as an ontological descriptive modifier.

5.3 SCALING

Following Middleton & Brown (2001), we can trace the distributed labour of managing the effective care and consequent transfer of a child from one environment of (absent or temporary) care to another. With transnational adoption, what a child is when he or she becomes ‘available’ while under the care of an orphanage in a sending country is subject to continual negotiation by social workers, carers, state officials, judges, adoption boards, agency operators, etc. However, from the perspective of the prospective adopter much of the work of adoption in the receiving country is to pre-figure the ‘child-to-be-adopted’ and the ‘adoptive family’ before physical contact is made. Prospective parents engage, and are engaged by various institutions, in virtual affective labour — for example, to demonstrate paternal ‘desire’ (Telfer 1999) — all of which renders the child in particular ways. Doctors who report on the child’s health, however, render the child in other ways under different constraints (and prospective parents can do likewise; see Cartwright 2003). These are all examples of ‘scaling’ the child. Hence, for instance, the child can be scaled *down* as a set of medical symptoms or behavioural indicators on a medical record, or scaled *up* as a social child — a complementary addition to a heteronormative family unit — or even as a representative of a ‘race’ (eg. Asian adoptees) or a member of a notional kinship or national group (eg. “our China girl”). Whichever scaling is negotiated, the virtual ‘child’ circulates as an ‘intermediary’ with particular forms (or a lack) of agency.⁹ What is fascinating is how the ‘adopted child’ and the ‘functioning adoptive family’ are ‘scaled’, ‘shifted’, co-materialised and resemiotised over time for practical purposes.

5.4 WAITING

One experience of great import, and a source of anxiety for many prospective adopters, is the long process of gaining approval from the relevant authorities, and thereafter the experience of waiting for the allocation or referral of a specific child, and, if all goes well, for their first physical contact with that child. For those couples or individuals who can browse the web or create their own websites, the ‘intimate public sphere’ (Anagnost 2000; Berlant 1997) of the Internet can serve as

⁹ Another way of understanding this is that over time the ‘child-to-be-adopted’ is *resemiotised* (Iedema 2003) or its properties are ‘shifted’ in, up or down.

a forum for self-reflection on this temporal and affective process. Of particular interest is how cultural and discursive technologies such as diary journals and waiting lists — and their diverse cycles, scales and trajectories — are maintained, anticipated, aligned, translated and circulated by different actors in their virtual practices, and thus how different knowledges and agencies (eg. institutional versus ‘lay’) are mediated and translated.

The printed and online literature produced by the state, the local authorities, the adoption agencies and the support groups — amongst others — shapes adoption as a process punctuated by a timeline of milestones and associated expectations. Much of this literature also finds its way in a mediated form onto the adoptive parents’ public websites. There is a tension, however, between the agency’s provision of general information for all clients and each client’s demand for more specific information about what they can expect when they join the adoption process with a particular agency (for a selected country) and about the progress of their specific case.

One important phase for the adoptive parents is the wait to be allocated a child from the ‘sending’ country they have chosen, for which procedures vary. The waiting list kept by the adoption agency, and made public by some agencies, is one crucial mediational means for adoptive parents in this phase. Depending on the procedures of the receiving country, the waiting list is usually a simple stack or queue comprising the anonymised ciphers of those approved clients who are waiting for the agency to match them with a ‘child-to-be-adopted’ in the sending country. Case numbers are assigned to every client so that they can be processed by the agency, but of more interest to us is the practical reasoning that clients engage in to recover information about their case, as well as its history relative to others, from information gleaned from the list and other sources. The online public waiting lists that parents can ‘browse’ on the Internet at their leisure, which some agencies provide as a service to their clients, are crucial mediational means for particular actors. Some adoption support groups or associations re-mediate and personalise the lists for their own purposes. These lists are an evolving mediational means — a cultural technology sustained by practices that interface or ‘translate’ between the practices of the adoption agency and their ‘clients’ — which serves as a resource for mediated action in such virtual spaces.¹⁰

¹⁰ Further studies will investigate how adopters integrate their online practices — browsing, building a web presence and taking part in networks and discussion forums on the Internet — with how they manage their domestic life, their contacts with the authorities and strangers, their participation in adoption preparation courses, and their ongoing disclosure of their adoptive status (to kin, friends, colleagues and strangers). We are also interested in how these practices mediate and assemble their lifeworld of adoption as nexus of practice, as well as construct and circulate sociocultural knowledge about the appropriate forms of adoptive relations.

6 CONCLUSION

With this paper I hope to have flagged a number of issues indicative of global transformations in our lives that motivate us to rethink our theories and methods under the umbrella of critical applied linguistics, *not* linguistics applied.¹¹ This transdisciplinary debate is complex, the theories difficult, and the stakes are high, but I feel that we must address both humans and nonhumans, the discursive and the material, the sociopolitical and the sociotechnical, the multitude and the network, in what Latour (2004) calls the progressive composition of the collective. And if we better understand how prospective adopters formally and informally navigate the virtual 'scapes' of adoption texts, media, rules, institutions, courses and practices, then a critical applied linguistics may be better able to recommend how to improve adoptive parenting courses, to promote egalitarian public adoption discourses and to provide timely online resources for facilitating the parents' decision-making about intercountry adoption and their adoptive practices within an ethical, child-centred policy.

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¹¹ Other issues that arise from transnational adoption, and which are relevant for a (critical) applied linguistics, include second first language learning, private language policy, birth language for special purposes and Global English as a mediating language. For example, bilingualism and multilingualism is an important concern for adopted children over two to three years of age, who learn a *second* first language concomitantly with *first* first language amnesia. Also, there is increasingly an overt recommendation by professionals and a choice made by parents to do cultural and linguistic 'heritaging' or 'roots'. One consequence is that of elective bilingualism, in which the adoptive parents choose to learn and provide support for more than one language. Moreover, there may be a desire to learn a transitional language for older adoptees, who may learn the 'birth language' in order to facilitate visits to the 'birth country'. And lastly, the adoptive couples who travel to the 'sending' country have to deal with the 'foreign culture' as tourists *and* adoption recipients. It is usually English which is their lingua franca.

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