

# Undoing Truth in Language Teaching: Toward a Paradigm of Linguistic Aesthetics

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Foucault's work has provided critical applied linguists many tools for deconstructing dominant understandings of language. However, his work has not been significantly engaged with by scholars who have attempted to develop alternative pedagogical approaches outside of these dominant understandings of language. Specifically, these alternative pedagogical approaches continue to be embedded within a discourse of truth that is antithetical to Foucault's project. This *recovering the linguistic truth paradigm* of applied linguistics may be inadvertently complicit in the development of new regimes of truth aligned with newly emerging relations of power. A more thorough engagement with Foucault's work related to developing an aesthetics of existence offers insights into developing a *paradigm of linguistic aesthetics* that is more aligned with Foucault's conceptualization of truth and that is resistant to these newly emerging relations of power. A fictional classroom is described to demonstrate the characteristics of this paradigm of linguistic aesthetics.

Critical applied linguistics has been greatly influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. In particular, Foucault's concept of governmentality—which he developed in a series of lectures in the 1970s (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2008)—has proven useful in deconstructing national/colonial framings of language and demonstrating the relations of power in which they are embedded (Pennycook, 1998, 2002, 2006; Tollefson, 2006). However, those in the field attempting to develop alternative pedagogical approaches to language teaching aligned with these new understandings have yet to systematically engage with Foucault's later work that attempted to reconstruct the world outside of modern relations of power. Specifically, these alternative pedagogical approaches continue to be embedded within a discourse of truth that is antithetical to Foucault's project. In this article I will argue that a more thorough engagement with Foucault's later work related to developing an *aesthetics of existence* offers insights in developing a new paradigm for language teaching aligned with Foucault's conceptualization of truth to complement the insights developed through language governmentality research.

I begin this article with an overview of Foucault's genealogical method and examine the insights that this method offers in deconstructing dominant understandings of language, specifically through the concept of language governmentality. I then examine innovative pedagogical approaches to language teaching that have developed in recent years as a response to this deconstruction of dominant understandings of language. I argue that while these innovative approaches are important, they continue to be wedded to a conceptualization of

truth that is antithetical to a Foucauldian perspective. Subsequently, I outline the insights that a more systematic engagement with Foucault's work in theorizing alternative pedagogical approaches offers in re-imagining language education—an alternative that I call a *paradigm of linguistic aesthetics*. I end with some general principles for implementing this new paradigm in language teaching.

### Foucault's Genealogical Method

Foucault's genealogical method is a historical methodology that looks to the past to try to understand the present. As Foucault (1984a) argues, genealogy is premised on the idea that "humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (p. 85). In short, every socio-historical context has what Foucault terms *regimes of truth* that are embedded in relationships of power organized around a specific historical rationality. The genealogist's task is to unearth these regimes of truth and denaturalize the historical rationality in which they are embedded (Foucault, 1984b). Therefore, a genealogist is not interested in trying to find a chronology to a particular historical period but rather tries to identify the discursive regimes that allowed for the emergence of certain ways of understanding the world. A genealogist also attempts to excavate *subjugated knowledges*—that is, ways of knowing that have been silenced by current regimes of truth. More importantly, a genealogist must then connect this to the present to denaturalize the present by demonstrating the impact that this history has had on our own understandings of the world.

Foucault's genealogical approach is most known as a deconstructive tool that exposes the historical origins of current relations of power. Indeed, this is primarily how the genealogical approach has been used in critical applied linguistics (Grinberg & Saavedra, 2000; Pennycook, 1998, 2002; Seargeant, 2010; Zhang, 2008). In the next two sections, I examine the deconstructive aspects of genealogy and the insights that it has offered (and continues to offer) for critical applied linguistics with a particular focus on Foucault's concept of governmentality and the ways that it has been taken up by critical applied linguists conducting research on *language governmentality* (Pennycook, 1998, 2002, 2006; Tollefson, 2006).

### Genealogy and Governmentality

In the mid-1970s, Foucault used his genealogical method to examine governmentality, which he defined as the "art of government" (Foucault, 2007, p. 92). He elaborates on this definition of governmentality adding that it entails:

the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument. (Foucault, 2007, p. 108)

In short, governmentality is the process where people are made governable subjects of the particular socio-historical contexts in which they reside. For Foucault, governmentality is not exclusively coming from the state, which one may traditionally associate with government. Instead, he conceives of governmentality not in a top-down centralized approach, but in a much broader sense in which knowledge produced through a variety of institutions coalesces in the creation of governable subjects and governable populations through the development of regimes of truth.

Foucault associates the genealogical origins of modern governmentality with changes in European society related to its gradual transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era. Before the modern era, power relations in Europe were characterized by what Foucault (1978) called *sovereign power* where power was centralized through deference to God and/or a sovereign monarch. With the challenges to this sovereign power that began during the European Renaissance and culminated in the European Enlightenment, new forms of governance emerged. This shift in governance was a realignment of power due to the newly emerging subjectivities associated with Enlightenment thinking and the discourse of freedom associated with it. Foucault (1978) characterizes this new power as "the omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another" (p. 93). That is, under sovereign power there was a clearly identifiable source of power that repressed those who challenged it. With the shift toward modern governance, power was no longer repressive, but rather productive in that it sought to produce ideal governable subjects through a variety of institutional apparatuses informed by the knowledge production of the newly emerging human sciences (Foucault, 1978).

This reconfiguration of power was emerging alongside the rise of nation-states in Europe as well as the ascent of the European bourgeoisie to political prominence. This nation-building process that developed concurrent to bourgeois nationalist revolutions marked a rupture in *episteme* (or knowledge system) that Foucault (2003) describes as a shift from "we have to defend ourselves against society" [to] "we have to defend society against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counterrace that we are despite ourselves, bringing into existence" (pp. 61-62). In other words, when there was a clear sovereign power, the corresponding understanding of governance was one of defending against an abuse of power by the sovereign. However, with the shift away from sovereign power in Europe and the rise of the European bourgeoisie to political prominence, the discourse shifted toward defending "the people" (i.e., the ideal bourgeois subject) against the inferior races within the populace.

Foucault focuses his examination of the production of the ideal bourgeois subject on the rise of Victorian sexuality. As Foucault (1978) describes it:

The primary concern was not repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that "ruled." This was the purpose for which the deployment of sexuality was first established, as a new distribution of pleasures, discourses, truths, and powers; it has to be seen as the self-affirmation of one class rather than the enslavement of another: a defense, a protection,

a strengthening, and an exaltation that were eventually extended to others—at the cost of different transformations—as a means of social control and political subjugation. (p. 123)

According to Foucault, the rise of the study of sexuality as part of the emerging human sciences of the Victorian era was mutually constitutive with the production of the idealized sexually pure bourgeois subject produced in opposition to the sexually impure racially inferior Other. He connects this to a political process where the bourgeoisie consolidates its power through protecting its members from this impure racial Other, all in the service of creating a strong national body politic.

Therefore, the rise of the nation-state was concomitant with a form of state racism that treated a certain race as superior to the inferior races within the nation-state. As theories of race began to merge with theories of biology, this inferiority became framed in terms of lack of cleanliness and impurity; that is, the inferior races were filthy and polluted and would contaminate the superior race unless something was done to prevent them from doing so. Foucault marks this desire to defend society from the unclean Other as an overarching theme of European modernity that would culminate in the state racism displayed by Nazism (Foucault, 2003). Yet, this state racism while perfected under totalitarian rule was also present within the discourses of democracy that emerged within this particular socio-historical context.

While Foucault connects the rise of modern governmentality with the emergence of nation-states in Europe, Stoler (1995) argues that colonization was also integral to the emergence of governmentality. Stoler demonstrates how the European bourgeois subject was not only produced in conjunction with the unclear inferior raced subject of Europe (i.e., the lower classes) but was also constructed in opposition to the colonial Other who was even lower on the scale of human civilization and cleanliness. As with Foucault, Stoler examines the emerging discourse of sexuality in colonial contexts and the ways that they produce idealized bourgeois subjects in contrast to both the colonized Other and the European government officials who intermingled with the colonized Other as part of colonial governance. Stoler describes how, at the same time discursive networks of power were coalescing around the creation of governmentality in Europe, this discursive shift was emerging as part of colonial governance. Just as it marked a shift in thinking in Europe, this discourse of impurity and the need for cleansing marked a shift in colonial relations. Whereas the colonized were once seen as subhuman, they were now seen as impure and in need of purification.

In summary, as sovereign power began to decline in Europe, a new form of governance emerged that was mutually constitutive with the rise of the nation-state as a political entity. It was premised on a universalizing narrative of human progress that necessitated the cleansing of impurities from the national body through knowledge gathered as part of the incipient human sciences (Foucault, 2003). What Foucault leaves unaddressed in his narrative is how colonization was also an integral and necessary part of this process. In fact, as Stoler (1995) argues, the emergence of this governmentality would not have been possible without colonization. This is why instead of discussing governmentality generically as Foucault does, I prefer to use the phrase *nation-state/colonial governmentality* to demonstrate the mutually constitutive nature of the formation of nation-states and colonization (Flores, 2012, in press).

While Foucault and Stoler focus their work on the role of sexuality as part of the development of nation-state/colonial governmentality, my interest is in the role of language in its development. In the next section, I examine and elaborate on work that has been conducted in critical applied linguistics that utilizes the framework of governmentality to understand the rise of modern understandings of language.

### Nation-States, Colonization, and Language Governmentality

Building on Foucault's concept of governmentality, language governmentality describes the process of "how decisions about language and language forms across a diverse range of institutions (law, education, medicine, printing) and through a diverse range of instruments (books, regulations, exams, articles, corrections) regulate the language use, thought, and action of different people, groups, and organizations" (Pennycook, 2006, p. 65). Language governmentality challenges the state-centric view of language policy and seeks to examine the multitude of social institutions and practices that intersect in the formation of governable ethnolinguistic subjects (Johnson, 2013; Pennycook, 2002). That is, aligned with Foucault's conceptualization of power in the modern era, language governmentality is understood as having no clearly identifiable origin.

Informed by Foucault's genealogical method, research on language governmentality seeks to develop a "critical and effective history [that] disavows the beliefs in transparent language, historical progress, enlightenment, or emancipation, constantly seeking to question the discursive construction of reality, both in the past and the present" (Pennycook, 1998, p. 26). In short, research informed by language governmentality does not rely on any predetermined truth of what language is but instead seeks to understand the emergence of specific historical rationalities related to language and then connect these rationalities to the present in ways that expose the power relations of our own time period (Pennycook, 1998). In other words, there is no inherent truth to the nature of language. Instead, regimes of truth about language are developed as part of the production of governable subjects to fit a specific socio-historical period.

It is the context of nation-state/colonial governmentality examined above that has framed modern language governmentality. That is, a new language rationality was integral to the production of the racial Other that society needed to be defended against. As Bonfiglio (2010) argued, the codification of a particular grammar and a particular pronunciation produced the bourgeois subject as the speaker of a more correct and perfect language than the racial Other. Once positioned as a more correct and perfect language, this codified language was then positioned as capturing "a unique, historical, and unifying experience, and this constituted the essential attribute of the *Volk*—the People—whose identity is best expressed in the nation-state" (Tollefson, 2013, p. 15). In short, the language practices of the bourgeoisie were codified as the true language of the nation. In order to be a full member of the nation, it was necessary to master this codified language. This idea lies at the core of nation-state/colonial framings of language governmentality.

Language governmentality was also integral to the development of the European colonial project. Specifically, alongside the production of homogeneous ethnolinguistic identities that erased linguistic heterogeneity in Europe was the

production of these idealized subject positions in European colonies. For example, Mühlhäusler (1996) looks at the imposition of the nationalist conception of “a language”<sup>1</sup> on the Pacific Rim as part of the process of colonization. As he argues, “the identification of languages and their subsequent naming is far from being an act of objective description, and it can constitute a very serious trespass on the linguistic ecology of an area” (p. 5). To Mühlhäusler, the categorization of language practices into “a language” on the Pacific Rim was a form of epistemic violence that did not represent the actual fluid language practices of people or the conception that the population had of their own language practices.

Pennycook (2002) further explores the impact of language governmentality in colonial contexts in his study of the colonial governments of Great Britain in Hong Kong and Malaysia. He notes two different discursive regimes that were framed as oppositional points of view regarding language policy in these colonial societies: (a) the Anglicists, who believed that colonial subjects should be instructed in English in order to teach them the superiority of British culture, and (b) the Orientalists, who believed that colonial subjects should be instructed in their vernacular (codified by Europeans and not reflective of the actual language practices of colonial subjects) in order to more effectively teach them the superiority of British culture. The point Pennycook makes is that despite superficially being oppositional, both discourses were complicit in the production of governable colonial subjects. He then connects this argument to the present, issuing a word of caution about mother tongue education, which tends to be framed as inherently progressive.

As can be seen, Foucault’s work offers great deconstructive power that can—and has—informed research in critical applied linguistics. Critical applied linguists have been able to use Foucault’s genealogical method and his concept of governmentality to examine origins of current ways of understanding language as well as denaturalize modern relations of power that they have produced. Foucault’s work has proven useful in understanding the ways that language has been used as part of the production of governable subjects within a national/colonial context, as will be examined in the next section. However, critical applied linguists attempting to develop alternative pedagogical approaches outside of nation-state/colonial framings of language governmentality have not systematically engaged with Foucault’s work—specifically his warning related to the inherent danger of claims about truth. Instead, the majority of the work that attempts to develop pedagogical alternatives continues to be embedded in what I call the *recovering the linguistic truth paradigm*.

### The Recovering the Linguistic Truth Paradigm of Applied Linguistics

Many critical applied linguists have attempted to use the insights that have emerged out of the deconstruction of dominant understandings of language in the language governmentality literature to recover the truth about the nature of language. In this section I will argue that while the recovering the linguistic truth paradigm has made important contributions to the field, it fails to engage with the basic tenet of Foucault’s theoretical framework—namely that any and all searches for truths are embedded in relations of power (Foucault, 1984b). In other words, deconstructing nation-state/colonial framings of language governmentality

<sup>1</sup> Mühlhäusler uses quotes here to indicate the ideological basis of the idea of enumerable languages.

in an attempt at documenting what is really there and developing pedagogical approaches that can respond to what is really there risks developing a new regime of truth embedded in reconfigured relations of power. Two overlapping strands of this recovering the truth paradigm will be examined in this section to illustrate this point. What follows is not a comprehensive review of these strands. Instead two authors representative of each strand have been selected to demonstrate the overarching argument of each strand and their relationship to truth.

The first strand of the recovering the truth paradigm explicitly makes connections to the context of modern-day globalization. The basic argument made by this school of thought is that increased mobility associated with globalization has allowed for new fluid language practices to develop that do not fit neatly into the national/colonial framing of language governmentality. García (2009) explores pedagogical implications of this perceived shift in language use associated with globalization. She argues that language education models coming from a United States and Canadian context deal with bilingualism from a *monoglossic perspective*, treating languages as separable in the minds of multilingual people. This monoglossic perspective leads to language education models that are premised on the strict separation of languages. Specifically, in monolingual educational contexts, students are forbidden from using their home language practices to develop the new language while in bilingual education contexts the languages are strictly separated in instruction with a prohibition on their mixing. She argues that while this monoglossic perspective may have been appropriate for a previous era, it no longer reflects the fluid language practices of bilingual and multilingual communities that are now possible—and indeed necessary—within our current era of globalization.

To replace this type of thinking, García (2009) argues for taking a *heteroglossic perspective*, where languages are not seen as separable and countable but as interacting in complex ways, and argues for a reconceptualized language education where fluid linguistic processes would be allowed to co-exist through *translanguaging*. In short, García challenges static language constructs that privilege monolingualism and advocates for the embracing of fluid language practices and the development of dynamic ethnolinguistic identities in language education classrooms. Her framework challenges constructs such as L1, L2 and idealized native speakers, and argues for more fluid language constructs that resist privileging monolingual populations and prepare people for participating in an increasingly globalizing world.

The second overlapping strand of the recovering the truth paradigm frames its project around discovering the truth about the past. This strand argues that fluid language practices have existed historically throughout the world and seeks to recover this history in ways that legitimize similar practices in the present. In a direct critique of the first strand, Canagarajah (2013) argues that fluid language practices “are often treated as a new development, ignoring the fact that such practices have been around in other times and places,” (pp. 36-37) and adds “what we have are new theories, but not new practices. What we considered legitimized knowledge in the Western academy has left out the important experiences and practices of millions of people outside the centers of research and scholarship” (p. 33). For Canagarajah the nature of language use has remained consistent throughout human history. What has changed is the dominant language ideologies

used to make sense of these language practices. He uses this understanding of history to argue for a shift in paradigm from a monolingual orientation to a *translingual orientation* that “posits that while language resources are mobile, they acquire labels and identities through situated use in particular contexts and get reified through language ideologies” (p. 15).

As part of this translingual orientation, Canagarajah (2013) argues for the development of *performative competence* which he defines as “the dynamic and reciprocal strategies translinguals adopt, based on their knowledge of *how* [that] motivate them to respond strategically to unexpected interlocutors and spaces with diverse norms in contact zones” (p. 174). With a specific focus on the writing classroom, he argues that the way to develop this performative competence is through a *dialogical pedagogy* where the teacher gives the students multiple opportunities to work on the same writing project over an extended period of time and provides scaffolding to students as they experiment with different modes of representation and different voices. In short, a translingual orientation seeks not to simply affirm fluid language usage but rather make fluid language usage central to all communicative tasks in the language classroom. This neoliberal subject shares many of the characteristics of the heteroglossic and translingual orientations currently emerging in critical applied linguistics

While the recovering the truth paradigm has contributed significantly to both the general literature on critical applied linguistics and the literature specific to language teaching, its commitment to a search for the truth leaves unexamined the ways that it may be producing new regimes of truth. That is, just as a shift in language rationality was a necessary component of nation-state/colonial framings of language governmentality, a shift in language rationality may be emerging that seeks to produce governable subjects for our current socio-historical context. An engagement with Foucault’s conceptualization of *neoliberalism* offers insights into what this new language governmentality might be. While most of the literature on neoliberalism tends to focus on more macro-issues such as privatization and deregulation (Harvey, 2003; Klein, 2007), Foucault (2008) focuses on the production of the ideal neoliberal subject, which he refers to as the *enterprising-self*. The enterprising-self is an autonomous, flexible, and innovative subject who is able to adapt to the rapidly changing social contexts of our current socio-historical period.

Therefore, while nation-state/colonial governmentality emerged as a way of molding newly emerging subjectivities made possible by the decline of sovereign power, neoliberalism seeks to mold the newly emerging subjectivities made possible by the many sociopolitical changes of our Post-Fordist global economy (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). In other words, just as Pennycook (2002) used Foucault’s framework to problematize the idea that native language instruction is inherently empowering and showed how it can be used as part of the production of nation-state/colonial governable subjects, one can use Foucault’s framework to problematize pedagogical approaches emerging from the recovering the truth paradigm as a newly emerging regime of truth that is part of the production of governable neoliberal subjects (Flores, 2013).

I raise these issues not to dismiss the work of scholars in the recovering the truth paradigm but rather to demonstrate the dangers of uncritically accepting truth at face-value without interrogating the relations of power in which truth

claims are embedded. In the next section, I argue that a continued engagement with Foucault’s later work may offer an alternative approach to reconceptualizing language education that is not positioned as a response to some seemingly objective truth but rather is positioned as an attempt to produce new ethnolinguistic subjectivities outside of the search for truth.

### Developing an Aesthetics of Existence

Toward the end of his life Foucault moved away from the deconstructive methods that he is most known for and began to elaborate more on what he saw as the reconstructive aspects of his genealogical method. Specifically, he sought to do this through a focus on ethics and aesthetics. As Paras (2006) describes it:

For the dying Foucault, the possibility of societal transformation in the present was linked not simply to the genealogical disassembly of modern configurations of power; it was intimately tied to the creative activity of strong and free individuals intent upon living their lives as works of art. (p. 127)

Yet, the free individual Foucault advocated was very different than the one who attempts to discover the truth about oneself and the world. Instead, Foucault sought to develop an ethical approach to living that rejected any universal truth through shaping our lives as “works of art” (Foucault, 1984c, p. 351). As Foucault argues, “from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as works of art” (Foucault, 1984c, p. 351). That is, as opposed to “the idea that one’s ‘true self’ was determinate and knowable” (Paras, 2006, p. 132), the free individual that Foucault was focused on was produced through “an open-ended artistic effort” (Paras, 2006, p. 133). Foucault (1984c) refers to this open-ended artistic effort as an *aesthetics of existence*.

The foundation of this aesthetics of existence is the belief in the inherent danger of regarding any claim to truth. As Foucault (1984c) argues:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper—and pessimistic activism. (p. 343)

The goal of an aesthetics of existence is, therefore, to develop an ethics framed around this pessimistic activism—an activism that is self-reflective as it attempts to develop new subjectivities outside of any search for a transcendental truth. These subjectivities contrast with traditional notions of individuality in that the ultimate goal is not to discover one’s supposedly true self but rather to experiment with various forms of being that attempt to challenge conventional norms. That is, if there is a normative aspect of Foucault’s project it is to constantly push the boundaries of what is considered normal and to constantly imagine, re-imagine, and experiment with ways of being outside of these norms.

Importantly, an aesthetics of existence does not negate the socio-historical context in which subjectivities are produced. Being acutely aware of current regimes of truth and their historical origins is essential to the development of an

aesthetics of existence. However, an aesthetics of existence also does not negate the creativity of individuals in developing new subjectivities that challenge current regimes of truth. As Bevir (1999) argues:

Although agents necessarily exist within regimes of power/knowledge, these regimes do not determine the experiences they can have, the ways they can exercise their reason, the beliefs they can adopt, or the actions they can perform. Agents are creative beings; it is just that their creativity occurs in a given social context that influences it. (p. 67)

This creativity opens up the possibility of “question[ing] the limits of the traditions and practices we inherit [and] exploring limits to authorized forms of subjectivity” (Bevir, 1999, p. 76-77). In short, within the context of an aesthetics of existence, freedom lies not in trying to understand one’s true nature, but rather through embracing an open-ended and indeterminate process of constant experimentation with new subjectivities (Foucault, 2003).

Because a large part of Foucault’s work examined sexuality (Foucault, 1978, 1988, 1990) his exploration of the development of an aesthetics of existence focused on sex acts. Foucault was interested in shifting the discourse of sexuality from one related to discovering the truth about the nature of sexual identities toward seeing sexuality as a creative force that could develop “new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture, and so on” (Foucault, 1994, p. 164). Toward the end of his life he became particularly interested in sadomasochism. In his view, sadomasochism opened up the possibility for creating pleasures outside the discourse of sexual identity that was created as part of current regimes of truth. As Foucault (1994) argues:

We know very well that what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their bodies—through the eroticization of the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure. (p. 165)

In Foucault’s view, sadomasochism also offered the possibility of producing new sexual subjectivities through turning relations of power into a game:

The S & M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and the slave, and at the end the slave has become the master. Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries. (Foucault, 1994, p. 169)

Sadomasochism provides a context where relations of power are made explicit. This explicit submission to power offers the opportunity to turn power relations into a game—a game whose rules have been denaturalized and can be changed. In short, while one cannot escape relations of power, one can consciously submit in ways that allow for new subjectivities within contingent relations of power to develop.

While Foucault’s project related to the study of sexuality, my interest is in extending the idea of an aesthetics of existence into the area of language. What follows below is a conceptualization of the development of an aesthetics of existence in language education—an approach I term a *paradigm of linguistic aesthetics*.

### The Paradigm of Linguistic Aesthetics in Language Teaching

Before exploring the implications of developing an aesthetics of existence in language teaching a few caveats are necessary. For one, what follows should not be read as *the* way of developing an aesthetics of existence through language but rather as one possible way thought of by one person attempting to develop his own language teaching practice into a “work of art” (Paras, 2006, p. 127). Secondly, I have chosen to create an example based on the schooling context that I am most familiar with. To this effect, the classroom that I will be providing a case study of is a fictional high school Language Arts classroom of Latino students across the continuum of bilingualism, ranging from students who use Spanish more regularly than English to students who primarily use English, taught by a Latino teacher who is a daily user of both English and Spanish. I leave it to others who are interested to extend this work to other contexts in the US or internationally. Finally, what follows should be read with the assumption that classroom realities are always much more complex and dynamic than what can be articulated in writing.

Before describing what I think is unique about this classroom, it is important to emphasize the fact that in this classroom many of the strategies that have been documented in the literature as “best practices” for “English Language Learners”<sup>2</sup> are still present. For example, the teacher scaffolds instruction in ways that support students in their language learning (Walqui, 2006). In addition, the teacher organizes units around themes to support students in making connections between the many concepts that they are learning (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002). There is also a strong emphasis on teaching learning strategies to students through both explicit modeling and opportunities for students to practice these strategies (Chamot, 2009). In short, the critique of language education offered by this class is not about the strategies that have been developed to support students labeled as “English Language Learners.” On the contrary, these teaching strategies are practices that all teachers should implement in their classrooms (though always with the eyes of a pessimistic activist).

Yet, there is one major difference between this classroom and the classrooms described in the best practices literature for “English Language Learners”—namely the ultimate goal of providing these supports. The goal in the current literature on “best practices” is to support students in the development of English as a second language—a language separate from the home language practices of “English Language Learners.” In contrast with this, the major goal of the classroom described below is to add to students’ linguistic repertoires and provide spaces for them to experiment with various subjectivities. As opposed to the traditional classroom for “English Language Learners” which seeks to mold students into idealized speakers of Standard Academic/American English, this classroom seeks

<sup>2</sup> The use of quotes is used for the purposes of problematizing the discourse of truth in which the labels “best practices” and “English Language Learners” are embedded while using insights gained from this literature as part of a project of undoing truth.

to create students who experiment with their linguistic repertoires in ways that undermine current linguistic relations of power through developing their use of language into works of art.

One way that this classroom does this is through permitting both the teacher and the students to use their entire linguistic repertoires in making meaning in the classroom. On a typical day, the teacher provides an introduction to class in Spanish then uses English for whole group instruction and caters his language practices to student needs when working with students in groups. He also presents information on PowerPoint bilingually. Students typically use a mix of English and Spanish when working in groups. In addition, it is a common phenomenon for students to utilize Google Translate and other Internet tools to help clarify concepts that they have not understood. As will be explored below, while there are language expectations for students in their writing, they are never told what language to write in. A student is never required to write in English or in Spanish—but they are expected to make conscious choices as to linguistic form in an attempt at developing their language practices into works of art. Below I will illustrate what I mean by this through a general description of the basic assumptions of a unit in this classroom. This will then be followed by a specific example of what this might look like in practice.

In the spirit of encouraging students to develop their language practices into works of art, the teacher makes language central to every unit that is taught to students. The basic assumption of all thematic units is that language is a contested category and that the linguistic form one chooses to explore for a particular topic is not separate from the ultimate meaning that one produces about the topic (Lu, 1991). The idea that all language use is embedded in relations of power lies at the core of every unit. This includes not simply exploring issues of Spanish and English, but also the different forms within each of these constructed languages. The ultimate goal is for students to become conscious users of blended discourses that are constantly being “re-blended” as students experiment with new subjectivities.

A description of some activities for one particular unit will help illustrate how this goal looks in practice. The theme of this particular unit is adolescence. The activities that are described below will focus on language. However, it is important to note that the possibility of developing language practices into works of art is also possible in activities without an explicit focus on language.

One major learning experience that the students participate in is a critical examination of scientific descriptions of adolescence. Students read a scientific article in either English or Spanish based on their preference. They are then asked to translate the article into a form that feels like their home language practices—that is, most similar to the language varieties and forms that are used in their home. They are given a series of questions that ask them to reflect on what they were able to translate easily and what they had difficulty translating or were not able to translate. They are also given a series of questions related to their representation of their home language practices, particularly the decisions they made and any difficulties they had in representing these practices. Part of the discussion centers on the difficulties inherent in all allegedly truthful representations and the politics of representations (Spivak, 1988). They are also asked to reflect on what it is possible to express about adolescence through scientific language and what is left out about adolescence when using this linguistic form. Finally, they reflect on the

larger epistemological stance of scientific language, which they are now able to identify as a constructed language with specific epistemological assumptions.

A second major learning experience that students participate in is to conduct a literary analysis of the work of authors who use translanguaging for stylistic purposes in exploring the theme of adolescence. Each of the pieces of writing will create an aesthetics of existence that creates new subjectivities that do not represent a static identity seeking to convey truth about oneself but rather represent attempts at consciously creating new subjectivities that will change once they have been written and/or performed. After reading the vignettes students are asked to reflect on the impact that the use of translanguaging had on the subjectivities being produced in the writing. They are also asked to translate Spanish words the author used into English and asked to reflect on any changes to the meaning that occurs and the effect this translating has on the vignette. This analysis will push students to reflect on their own language choices when writing their own artistic pieces on adolescence later in the unit.

Related to the analysis of literature, the students also explore uses of language in non-written forms by artists exploring the theme of adolescence and reflect on the multimodality of communicative processes (Kress, 2010). There is a particular focus on how translanguaging is utilized by spoken word poets performing at the Urban Word Teen Poetry Slam. Students explore the ways that translanguaging and performance are blended to create subjectivities that critique current relations of power and open up spaces for new understandings of adolescence that incorporate subaltern perspectives. The students are also asked to compare and contrast the linguistic form and meaning of these performances and others with the linguistic form and meaning of both the scientific text and the literary work. Part of this reflection is related to what possibilities are opened up and foreclosed by each of the linguistic forms. In addition, questions are raised as to the sole focus on language in current understandings of communication and the role that performance can play in producing new subjectivities. Students will reflect on the different subjectivities produced through language and performance within these performance pieces and begin to brainstorm ways of producing particular subjectivities in their own autobiographical work.

A culminating project for the unit is for students to produce a piece of writing exploring the theme of adolescence which experiments with language in ways that make their language use into works of art that create new subjectivities. In order to help them with this process, they are provided with graphic organizers that help them brainstorm ways of blending language forms in ways that convey the particular subjectivities they are attempting to produce. One student may experiment with blending a scientific linguistic form conveyed through English with poetry written in Spanish in the form of a comic as an attempt to convey her interest in science and comics as well as her commitment to challenging scientific language to become more culturally inclusive and more aligned with modern youth culture. Another student may decide to write and perform a spoken word piece in Spanish with a few key words in English that were key vocabulary words for the unit to demonstrate how his linguistic repertoire is growing to include academic words in English and challenge the dichotomy of academic and non-academic language. Still another student might develop a written text in English but include some dialogue in a blend of English and Spanish to provide a more complex representation of

the home language practices of her family along with an accompanying video that emphasizes the fluidity of her home language practices.

The point is that all students will consciously participate in translanguaging and multimodal practices that challenge conventional ways of communication that were developed within a larger context for the search for truth. Each of the pieces of writing will be creating an aesthetics of existence through the creation of new subjectivities through communication that do not represent a static identity seeking to convey truth about oneself but rather an attempt at consciously creating new subjectivities that will change once they have been written and/or performed. That is, these projects will support students in turning their language practices into works of art that challenge current understandings of appropriate language use. At the same time it will make students aware of the relations of power embedded in all language use and allow them to turn language use into a game with contingent relations of power that can be changed if desired.

The ultimate goal of all of these activities is for students to become conscious of how language can be used to experiment with new subjectivities. The major understanding that students are expected to gain is that they are in charge of how they use language and can consciously deviate from standard rules in order to experiment with new ways of being. What is created is a classroom space where students create linguistic works of art and form a multitude of democratic language practices without linguistic hierarchies.

### Conclusion

While Foucault's concept of governmentality has been used in critical applied linguistics to deconstruct modern understandings of language, insights from engaging with his work have yet to have a significant impact on theorizing language education. On the contrary, scholars attempting to reconceptualize language education continue to embed their work within a recovering the truth paradigm that fails to engage with Foucault's cautions about the acceptance of any transcendental truth. This article has offered the paradigm of linguistic aesthetics as an alternative that extends the reconstructive aspects of Foucault's work to language education.

On the one hand, what is offered by the paradigm of linguistic aesthetics may seem like nothing new. Indeed, many (if not all) of the activities proposed above would likely be supported by scholars working in the recovering the truth paradigm. The difference, however, is the underlying theory of change. In the recovering the truth paradigm, change comes by discovering the truth and responding to it accordingly. In the paradigm of linguistic aesthetics, change comes by denying the existence of truth and constantly seeking to reinvent oneself outside of what is currently taken as true. It is through this release of the imagination that the kernels of social change develop and grow (Greene, 2000). A paradigm of linguistic aesthetics offers one tool to help students experiment with new subjectivities that will help them move towards creating a new world.

On the other hand, what is offered by the paradigm of linguistic aesthetics may seem too radical to be realistically implemented in the classroom. In the increasingly high-stakes contexts of schooling with increasing mandates placed on both teachers and students, it may seem impossible to find time to explore the nuances

surrounding the politics of language use and experiment with new subjectivities. Indeed, in a context where art is increasingly removed from the classroom (Roegen & Kim, 2013), it may seem inexcusably naïve to advocate treating language as a work of art. Yet, at least in the US context, this is exactly the kind of shift being asked for in current standards-based reform initiatives—particularly the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS requires students to become conscious users of language for strategic purposes (Brisk & Proctor, 2012; Van Lier & Walqui, 2012). What better way to do this than to treat language as a work of art?

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