Sociolinguistic Approaches to Difference: A Critical Perspective on Language in its Material and Imagined Contexts

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Date: March 14, 2023 (Tuesday)
Time: 4:30pm - 6:15pm (Hong Kong Time, UTC +8)
Venue: Lee Shau Kee Building 302,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

(Re)conceptualizing and (re)theorizing difference is one of the core ways in which sociolinguistic scholarship involves itself with projects of social advocacy for marginalized groups. While variationist scholars counter deficit views by demonstrating the logic and coherence of linguistic difference, those taking a more social constructivist approach argue that difference and its consequences are ideological constructs that produce marginality. In this talk, I use my own trajectory as a scholar to discuss these approaches, along with an additional way of conceptualizing difference: as a real fact based on embodied experiences of unequal material conditions. I build on theories of chronotopes and scales and my recent ethnographic research with migrant domestic worker activists in Hong Kong to argue that a recognition of difference as real and material has important implications for sociolinguistic research and advocacy. More specifically, I demonstrate how it (1) allows scholars to reflect on the limits and possibilities of research that seeks social transformation through retheorization of language and (2) enables a recognition of the "special" status of the knowledge of materially marginalized groups. I also provide concrete examples of how such materialist approaches have informed my research and advocacy work, and make note of the unresolved dimensions of this ongoing work.

Speaker

Lydia Catedral is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Translation at City University of Hong Kong. She is a sociolinguist whose research focuses on the intersections between language, identity, and morality across time and space. She has conducted ethnographic research with different groups of transnational migrants, including her current work with progressive organizations led by migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. In her trajectory as a scholar, she has continuously been on a search for connections between sociolinguistic research and social advocacy for marginalized and exploited communities. She has published in *Applied Linguistics, Journal of Sociolinguistics and Language in Society* and her co-authored book, *Chronotopes and Migration: Language, Social Imagination, and Behavior* is published with Routledge.

All are Welcome