Navigating the Doctoral Journey: Towards Possibilities of Decolonisation-informed Dispositions

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ABSTRACT

This paper is derived from an ongoing longitudinal ethnographic study exploring Chinese doctoral students' trajectories across different stages of their PhD programs. Guided by the South Theory and academic discourse socialisation frameworks, the original project aims to explore how doctoral students in their academic trajectories interact with complex nexus of communities and hierarchies. Using two excerpts from the larger dataset, this paper captures 1) the presence of essentialist assumptions premised upon Global North-South binaries, and 2) the embedded possibilities towards decolonisation-informed dispositions. These two data excerpts concern the most centred issue of the original project as well as the doctoral journey: academic writing and "academic language", framing decolonisation-informed dispositions in deference to translingualism and multimodal repertoire-deploying communication. To that end, findings suggest the need for dismantling and reconceptualising what it can mean by such constructs as language structures, language prestige, and communication repertoire. While the original project explores decolonisation-informed training and support schemes for doctoral students in navigating their academic trajectories, this paper specifically invites further scholarly discussions on possibilities of cultivating awareness in day-to-day interactions.

Keywords: Academic language, academic socialisation, doctoral education, decolonisation, Global South

INTRODUCTION

The original project was drawing from lenses of the Southern theory and sociocultural frameworks of academic language socialisation, this project is situated in the transdisciplinary window of applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. It explores the complexities

surrounding Chinese doctoral students' academic socialisation trajectories through tracing their language-and-literacy-relevant practices situated in multi-scalar chronotopes. The leading objective is not to compare, but to explore what kinds of dynamics (power, social, structural) function dominantly across micro, meso and macro contexts, and thereafter how the interplay of personal trajectories and these dynamics unfold in participants' narratives.

This paper selects sample data excerpts representing the central and survival-critical issue of the doctoral journey–academic writing and "academic language", to discuss how embedded possibilities of awareness raising towards such dispositions are traceable in participants' mundane activities and should be given attention in nuanced ways.

RELATED LITERATURE

Decolonisation and the Southern Theory

There are roughly two main foci in current trends of decolonising education and academia (Collyer, 2018; Santos, 2014): one is to reinstate the knowledge systems previously made marginalised by colonial powers through paradigm enforcement and assumed universality. Another is to dismantle such power relations that sustain dominance, which set parameters of knowledge and knowers. The Southern Theory (Connell, 2018; Hamid, 2023) represents an assemblage of ontological and epistemological lenses that challenges any paradigms in subject- and context-dependent ways. The Southern theory does not aim to deny or exclude any ways of thinking but recognises the relational and interdependent nature of power relations and explores knowledge in non-universalising ways.

Academic Discourse Socialisation (ADS)

ADS has its roots in language socialisation: newcomers' socialisation through and into language practices of specific communities (Duff, 2010). The core concept, community of practice, deals with how newcomers gradually reach more central participation and positions, and thus become experienced members. Major directions of ADS studies include feedback uptake, newcomer-expert relationship, etc., and are now leading to multimodal literacies and oral discourse (Friedman, 2021; Kobayashi et al., 2017).

"Academic Language" and Unequal Englishes

The conception of "academic language" has been argued problematic by scholars, such as being context-reduced and treating language as discrete systems. Underlying these problems, just as decolonisation perspectives highlight, is how ideologies of language use and ability become predispositions of people, creating boundaries and deficit prescriptions (Corella, 2020; Heller & Morek, 2015). It has therefore been proposed to investigate the enregisterment processes surround academic language: how typifications of language use

become socially indexical and point to types of people (Rhodes et al., 2021). And with the fact that academic discourse is a melting pot of Englishes, to decolonise Englishes and language beliefs, and more generally to decolonise knowledge and education requires critical engagements in revisiting and dismantling hegemonic structures from relational sociocultural, sociopolitical, and historiographical scopes (Canagarajah, 2022; Tupas, 2021).

METHODS

The key solution towards tackling the abovementioned conundrums, as Canagarajah (2022) and Rose et al. (2022) have suggested, is to provide local answers to educational problems: to value the role of on-the-ground, granular adaptations and innovations in informing better practice. Thus, the original project adopts longitudinal ethnographic study to follow a small participant sample yet acquire holistic, in-depth, and otherwise unattainable data throughout doctoral students' academic life. Datasets are collected from semi-structured and informal interviews, shadowing observation, participant-provided text materials (e.g., essays/ articles, presentation slides, journals, experiment reports), social media posts, among others. Data analysis scheme of the project is illustrated in Figure 1.

    As explained above, this paper presents two selected data excerpts and preliminary data analysis. It should be noted that any discussion in this paper is derived from the datasets and analysis of the original project
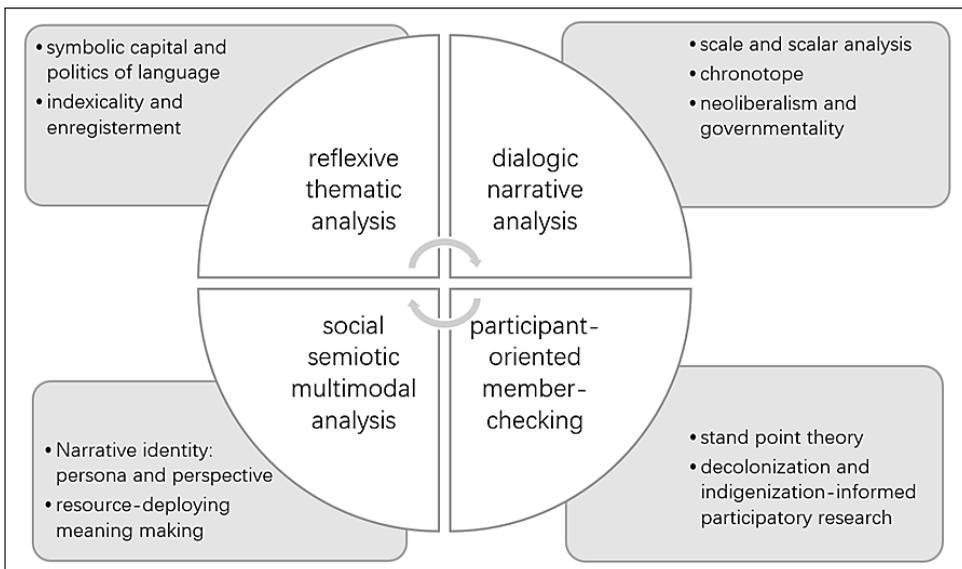

Figure 1. Data analysis scheme of the original project

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The excerpts (Figure 2) presented here are a page of participant M's daily laboratory notes, and an extract of an informal discussion on this between M and the researcher (me, via WeChat, the dominant online messaging app in Mainland China). In the area highlighted in red, most disciplinary terms are written in English; by contrast, in other areas of this page as well as all other note pages provided by M, most contents are in Mandarin Chinese, as is the exclusive medium of instruction throughout her educational trajectory. M provides a rather playful account in our retrospective discussion on this case: "an after effect of reading and writing journal articles," then continues with more specific reasons that the English terms are easier to write (certain Chinese terms have much more strokes, for example gliadin-麦醇溶蛋白) and some terms may "become ambiguous if translated into Chinese".

For this piece of multimodal (texts, doodling illustrations, scratching symbols, page lines, etc.) and multilingual (English and Mandarin Chinese) work, M shows natural deployment of available meaning-making resources, consciously and unconsciously, out of on-site reaction from such criteria as convenience, utility, and meaning negotiation. Nevertheless, another natural reaction here is how Maozhi considers some disciplinary terms as "not easy to understand" when translated from English to Chinese, whereas such concern for potential ambiguity prioritises reproducing the meaning coded in the English version.
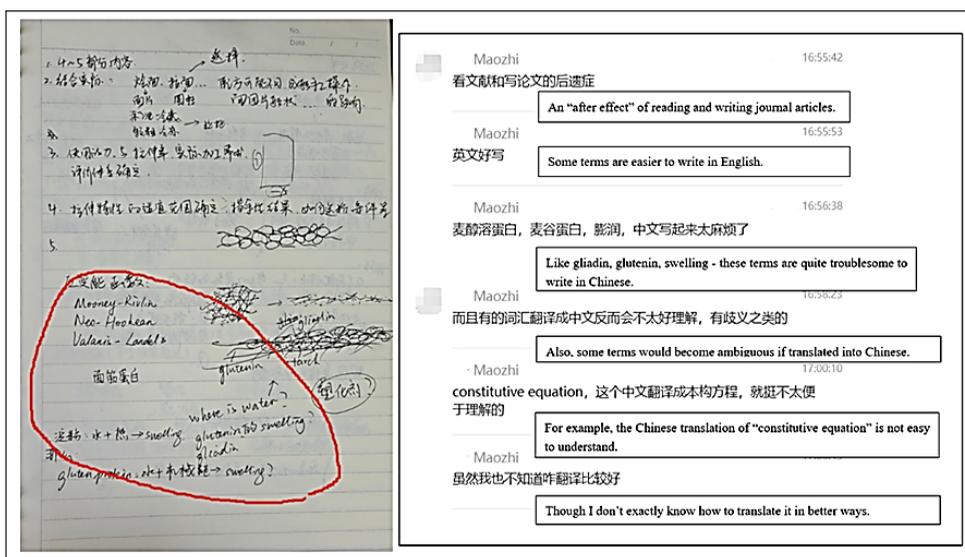

Figure 2. An extract of participant M's laboratory notes and relevant discussion (highlighted and translated by the researcher, member-checked with the participant)

None other than a segment of data as such can explain how possibilities of awareness raising towards decolonisation-informed dispositions are evident in individuals' day-to-day activities and should receive attention. Individuals' perceptions on sets of norms, beliefs, and standards are traceable in their product-producing choices and explanations, carrying both assumptions forged by dominant discourse as well as possibilities towards cultivating new dispositions. In this specific case, this would require reconceptualising what it can mean by such constructs as language structures, language prestige, and resource/ repertoire-deploying communication.

CONCLUSION

M's self-doubting and conversation-fixing explanation shows the participant's spontaneous deployment and awareness of communication resources with or without consciously realising structures of oppression or possibilities of meaning-making systems. Such possibilities towards decolonisation-informed dispositions are often intertwined with dominant assumptions enregistered upon binary North-South understandings of relations and social meanings. Binaries, North-South relations, Englishes and academic language – whichever term to be used in essence tells the same truth about ever-present unequal power dynamics shaping dominant discourse, evaluating parameters, and altogether how individuals perceive selves against the social world. While such is the natural course within socialisation processes, possible changes are embedded in day-to-day bits and pieces towards altering dispositions, starting from what it can mean by a basic construct accompanied by self-recognition.

Aligning with the AILA2024 theme "Linguistic Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Sustainability", this paper proposes doing decolonisation-informed linguistics fieldwork that emphasises context sensitivity, relational analyses, and constantly revisited positionality. This project calls for more inclusive and pedagogically effective support for research postgraduate students towards dispositions informed by translingualism, decolonisation, and multimodal repertoire-deploying communication; to provide local answers to educational problems; and to value the role of on-the-ground, granular adaptations

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