

# Exploring languaging through an ontological register

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## Introduction

Law and Mol (2020) provide an insightful critique to dominant approaches to language, arguing that “to talk of language is to imply that it is possible to disentangle how people talk (or sign or write) from *the practices* in which they do so. It is to suggest that vocabularies and grammars (or signs and syntax) lead lives of their own on a plane removed from their mundane incarnations” (emphasis added, 268). What is effectively being critiqued is the notion of language(s) as clearly bounded and stable systems, existing ‘out there’ beyond specific instances of use, rather than as language—or rather, *languaging*—coming into being through performances, practices, and enactments. As researchers with a keen interest in language studies and applied linguistics, a key component of our work has been to theorise what language might be—in other words, what are its constituent parts, what does it *do*, and where may it be found? What makes something ‘language’? This text explores these questions in line with Law and Mol’s (2020) concerns, and discusses the notion of *languaging* across two axes: firstly, language is addressed in an ontological register in an effort to rearticulate language from ‘object’ to ‘practice’; secondly, we trace the emergence of languaging as a concept derived from outside English-language academia and beyond scholarly fields which study language *per se*. While in recent years the so-called multilingual turn within language

studies has led to a substantial body of work on languaging (as well as on associated concepts such as translanguaging and metrolingualism), the term is seldom examined in relation to its roots outside this field or the English language academe, and beyond human language practices.

### On language ontologies

We begin by situating ourselves and our ideas. We have worked in the fields of language education, translation, and language studies for a number of years. Being deeply involved in such fields across different facets of our work – as teachers, practitioners, and researchers – has led us to question, and to attempt to *rethink*, what lies at the core of what we do: essentially what are the form(s) of *language* being operationalised at different times, by users, theorists, students, and practitioners? What is language across contexts? How is language defined, by whom, and for what purposes? In other words, we have been asking some fundamental questions as to *what language is*. We have noticed, for example, that salient assumptions about the nature(s) of language(s) do not necessarily align with what we encounter in practice. We have noted, similarly, that theories *about* language at times appear to ignore the *reality* of language – that is, the practices that bring language (and what we subsequently discuss as *languaging*) into being. Finally, we think that *how* the subject that uses language is defined is often limited and limiting. With these concerns in mind, we began to collaboratively question ‘truths’ (i.e., assumptions and myths) about language(s) on the one hand, and to playfully consider other ways of thinking about, theorising, and mobilising language(s). There is no universal way in which language has been defined and, as researchers, we have used the fallacy of universality as a starting point. What follows is based on this body of work, on our ideas of how language is *worlded*, or how practices create language(s)/languaging. In short, we are concerned with how language is *ontologised*.

Language is not only a determinative factor in how realities are performed (as written, spoken, or signed); rather, it should also be subject to the same methodological scrutiny. Different conceptions and practices concerning language correspond not only to different language *ideologies*—meaning how language is framed—but are constitutive of language *ontologies*—or, what language is (Demuro & Gurney 2021). Examining language in an ontological register allows us to move away from the notion that language exists abstractly, somewhere essential ‘out there,’ to argue that it resides in the *practices* that bring it into being: “language practices, and the theoretically

defined conceptions of language which correspond to these, are grounded in and revealing of particular ontologies” (Demuro & Gurney 2021: 1). Performing language requires a theory, either implicitly or explicitly held, of what language is: “the *being of language* depends in great part on beliefs about that being and the way in which these beliefs influence practice” (emphasis added, Seargeant 2010: 4).

The ontological turn provides an entry point into the study of ways of being (Escobar 2016), knowing and doing (Henare et al. 2007), and for grappling with the implications of co-existing realities (de la Cadena & Blaser 2018). Examining language in an ontological register makes it possible to simultaneously consider *multiple* ways of understanding and performing language, stepping away from the search for fundamental or universal features inherent to all language practices. That is, language in an ontological register is more than *any singular account*, dependent on the practices, or worlding processes, that bring it into being: “[o]ne can speak of a given worlding or ontology as long as one can trace its enactment” (Blaser 2013: 553; see also Blaser 2009, 2016). The implications of this statement are numerous and extensive; they concern everyday practices from determining ‘appropriate’ language use, and processes of translation and interpreting, to deeper questions such as *who* uses language and why and how we recognise some forms of language (or languaging) as legitimate over others.

### **From language as object to languaging as practice**

In making ontological assertions about language, we draw in part on the foundations set by the recent multilingual turn in language studies. Much of this work has aimed to uncover the ways in which language users interact with the resources at their disposal to make meaning; significantly, this does not necessarily correspond to the boundaries which separate particular languages from each other. Indeed, in many cases, scholars have presented significant critiques of the ideologically charged, partial, and mythological accounts of language which have dominated the field. However, the contributions of the multilingual turn are not merely a question of mobilising differing language ideologies, but they concern a more significant shift to ontologise linguistic practices across ever changing situations. This is often represented via the term ‘languaging.’

Within linguistics and language studies, languaging has been proposed as a more comprehensive and *accurate* way of understanding human linguistic practice. While ‘language’ is a noun, languaging adopts the form of a verb; that is, the term refers to an

action. Becker (1991), a North American linguist, provokingly argues that there is no such thing as language outside of practice, “only continual languaging, an activity of human beings in the world” (2). This notion has been promoted through cognate terms such as translanguaging and metrolingualism, which capture linguistic behaviour across discrete language codes (Lewis, Jones & Baker 2012; Li 2018). While language codes are understood to provide users with sets of resources which they can employ to make meaning, these are not the only resources available to them to do so, and the arbitrary bracketing of languages as discrete entities is more ideological than determinative of how we use them. Furthermore, Li (2018), an applied linguist specialising in multilingualism and language acquisition, defines translanguaging as ‘a multi-scalar organization of processes that enables *the bodily* and *the situated* to interact with situation-transcending cultural-historical dynamics and practices’ (emphasis added, 17); in other words, languaging is always a situated and embodied practice, which is responsive to (but not bound by) other language practices insofar as memory, culture, politics, and so on, preserve and value them.

Languaging is a term which has origins *beyond* human linguistic practices, although this is seldom acknowledged in the existing literature. To better appreciate the genealogy of languaging, to locate the term within dynamic scholarly discussions, the following section turns to the origins of languaging as outlined by Maturana and Varela (1987) to expand on the idea of languaging as an ontology of language situated beyond the human.

### On the origins of languaging

This section conducts a meta-analysis to position the term ‘languaging’ itself as an instantiation of languaging practice. That is, languaging is a concept caught up in processes of translation and interdisciplinary study, with diverse applications across time and geographies. As stated, while most current accounts of languaging operate in relation to human (*Homo sapiens*) practices, this has not always been the case and may not be the case in future.<sup>1</sup>

Maturana and Varela (1987) introduce languaging as a means to discuss cognition, knowledge, and social and cultural behaviours amongst humans and nonhumans. As biologists and philosophers from Santiago de Chile, Maturana and Varela’s influence extends across numerous disciplines within and beyond the natural sciences, and they are well-known for the concept of *autopoiesis* – or, the capacity of living systems to self-regulate and distinguish themselves

(see Maturana & Varela, 1980). In their work, Maturana and Varela (1987) explore the ways in which behaviour and experience are inseparable from biological structures, particularly from the nervous system. Putting aside “our daily tendency to treat our experience with the seal of certainty, as though it reflected an absolute world” (25), they claim that “every act of *knowing* brings forth a *world*” (emphasis added, 26) and further “all doing is knowing, all knowing is doing” (26). There are clear parallels here with the premise of *worlding*—as used by scholars such as Mario Blaser—as a practice that brings particular worlds into existence. Within this scheme, phenomena such as languaging are constituted through social interactions (couplings, in Maturana and Varela’s vernacular) which are repeated and sustained. However, such practices are *not* restricted to humans: “once organisms with a nervous system arise, if the organisms take part in recurrent interactions, these couplings will occur” (181).

Languaging arises from and modulates this social domain. Maturana (1970) and Maturana and Varela (1987) argue that languaging is fundamentally cooperative; it allows for the ongoing coordination of action, which develops as members of a social system live together. They provide a brief definition: “[w]e operate in language when an observer sees that the objects of our linguistic distinctions are elements of our linguistic domain. Language is *an ongoing process that only exists as languaging*, not as isolated items of behaviour” (emphasis added, Maturana & Varela 1987: 210). The actual term *languaging* appears in the 1987 English language translation of their book *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. In the original Spanish language version, the authors assert that, “[o]peramos en lenguaje cuando un observador ve que tenemos como objetos de nuestras distinciones lingüísticas elementos de nuestro dominio lingüístico” (Maturana & Varela, 1984: 139) – or, as translator Robert Paolucci puts it, “we operate in language when an observer sees that the objects of our linguistic distinctions are elements of our linguistic domain”. The second sentence – that language is an ongoing process that only exists as languaging – is not present in the original text, but the idea is arguably communicated through the notion of *operar en lenguaje* – to operate in language – to form the kernel of *languaging*. The terms *lenguajear* (to language) and *lenguajeo* (languaging) are subsequently used in this body of work (see Maturana, 2002: 50).

Building on this, Mignolo (cited in Delgado, Romero & Mignolo, [2000] 2001) provides a neat summary of *languaging* among nonhumans:

Language in Maturana's and Varela's argument is any type of inter-action between living organisms, and not only human living organisms. Put this upside down and what you have is that 'human languages' are just a small part and a particular type of interaction among living organisms, different, for instance, from the language of the 'flora' and the 'fauna'. (16) <sup>2</sup>

To unpack Maturana and Varela's (1987) concept, we need to understand their assertion that language was never invented to 'take in' an outside world *per se*; rather, by the act of languaging—with the behavioural coordination that this act implies, where individuals coordinate their actions through shared items in the linguistic domain, i.e., words, gestures—*we bring forth worlds*. Consequently, in languaging, we find ourselves "in an ongoing transformation in the becoming of the linguistic world" (Maturana & Varela 1987: 234-235).

## Conclusion

When we refer to languaging as constituted by performances and practices, we are referring to "the totality of actions, inter- and intra-actions, relations, pronouncements, and so on, that bring a particular apprehension of language into existence" (Demuro & Gurney, unpublished). In the case of standard academic English, language in this dominant mode emerges through vast and complex interrelated apparatuses which ontologise the language as a bounded and stable code which retains meaning across time and space, and for which change is incremental and highly regulated. Academic English is premised upon a particular conception of grammar, reified through grammar textbooks and dictionaries, and standardised through peak bodies, the education system, and publication processes. Within academic English, it is possible to conceive of and identify (in)correct applications of established norms. Differences or discrepancies in how academic English is performed are worthy of attention, such as those highlighted in the study of disciplinary literacies. Additions to the language are also noteworthy, and they are made via processes which are highly regulated—for example, systematic updates to dictionaries or peer-reviewed publications. While all of this may seem obvious and 'normal', such standardised language practices in relation to (what is now codified as) English are a relatively new phenomenon. It is not difficult to establish a sense of change in quite recent history by revisiting old texts or tracking the chronology and etymology of specific words. Further, it is of course no coincidence that English has become *lingua franca* of the academic world, as this is intricately linked to the exercise of

imperial and colonial powers, and the corollary dominant geopolitics of knowledge production and dissemination. This is to say, ontologies of language correspond to and are embedded within sociohistorical and political processes. In this case, formalised and objectified languages are far more exportable than loosely bounded sets of language practices used by one group of people.

Through an ontological register, however, we can argue that dominant accounts and practices of language exist alongside *other modes* that (un)intentionally challenge and subvert them. As we have aimed to show here, languaging is one such concept; it not only emerges outside English-language academic contexts and in the context of the natural sciences (as discussed, the concept was used by Chilean biologists ‘as an idea’ in Spanish), it also ontologises languaging as a practice common to many living beings. As Law and Mol (2020) have shown, by challenging and rethinking practices associated with language, and by opening up academic writing and thinking beyond that of the English language in particular, we are able to begin to feel, sound out, and size up a range of worlds, ways of being, ideas and feelings, beyond what English itself can convey. However, as a final provocation, we could also argue that the act of attributing a particular term to a bounded language, such as *English* or *Spanish*, is in itself somewhat problematic. For translation to be understood as the transfer of meaning from one code into another, whether satisfactorily or partially, we engage in a practice of freezing instances of languaging and attempting to maintain their meanings across time and space. Languaging does not simply constitute the use of *words* but is better represented as meaning-making processes; here, the boundaries of the meaning-making processes are perhaps less clear than their effects. Meaning-making processes construct and are part of different worlds, from the level of the group to the individual. While Mol and Law (2020) argue that scholars, particularly anthropologists, should refrain from squeezing others’ “realities into our grids [and rather] hold back in our attempts at translation” (271), we would extend this further, and we would ask, as language theorists, which realities are acknowledged, and which are ignored, if definitions of language remain human-bound.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We do not claim to exhaustively map all occurrences of the term, but rather to trace its evolution through the work of Maturana and Varela in the 1980s, and into contemporary discussions. As Cowley (2019) notes, the ‘intuitive idea’ of languaging has a history stretching back some centuries.

<sup>2</sup> Mignolo (cited in Delgado, Romero & Mignolo, [2000] 2001) further states that “there is something particular to living organisms we call “human,” and that particularity is that “human living organisms” can be observers of domains of interactions among living organisms, are able to describe those behaviors, and furthermore, to observe themselves observing other organisms” (16).

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