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Epistemology of language and space: an introduction

In recent decades, space has been at the center of many linguistic fields concerned with how spatiality (territory, place, social space, virtual space) influences and conditions linguistic phenomena, from linguistic variation and communicative interaction to language shift and maintenance, migration, identity, or language policy and planning. This special issue aims to bring together articles that address current epistemological issues in the study of language and space from both theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches. The goal of the issue is to offer an interdisciplinary mosaic that reflects how conceptual and methodological developments in the study of the language-space relationship open up new ways of understanding the spatial nature of linguistic phenomena and the linguistic and discursive reality of space.

That the journal *Energeia* houses a special issue on epistemological questions of language and space is convenient in two ways. First, because the epistemology of linguistics is a linguistic-philosophical concern that constitutes an object of reflection for the discipline itself, for the philosophy of language, and even for the philosophy of science, being that all three are hardly dissociable in a Coserian sense when it comes to addressing epistemological questions. Secondly, because the spatial aspect of language is, as Kabatek states in his contribution to the issue, "part of the energeia, as a 'Verraumung' – a 'creating space' – of language, as an anchoring of linguistic signs in space" and there is no linguistic practice outside space.

It would be an evident exaggeration to claim that space as a concept belongs to the epistemology of all linguistic disciplines. However, such an improbable epistemic ubiquity of space could be tempting if we consider the spatial nature of important concepts and topics in current linguistic research such as border, distance, context, network, etc.

The aim of this introduction is not to present an exhaustive historical discussion of the idea of space in relation to language, but rather to offer a conceptual systematization that can serve to sort out the main epistemological issues of language and space. In this sense, a minimal epistemology of space within the study of language needs to address at least two fundamental questions: what is space? And how can space be integrated into linguistic research? Both

questions are strongly linked to each other, since the place that space occupies in many fields of linguistics depends on how spatiality is defined.

What is space?

A look at the ways in which linguistic research approaches space reveals its first characteristic: *plurality*. In a general sense, space is a logical-material idea that implies a multiplicity of parts organized in chains of concatenations that are independent of each other (Bueno Martínez 1976). As a dynamic totality, space is structured in at least three orders of spatiality: physical-material, social and mental (Britain 2013; Caravedo 2014).

- The *physical-material order* refers to the physical space in which a place is defined, dispossessed of its social meaning. Although normally understood intuitively as a surface or distance, it should not be thought of as a plane, but rather as a surrounding space inhabited by bodies. In this sense, material space includes both geodesic surfaces and distances as well as places at different levels, from cities to the architectonic structures that shape them. This materiality of places determines the forms of spatial coincidence of speakers.

- The *social order* refers to space "shaped by social organisation and human agency, by the human manipulation of the landscape, by the creation of a built environment and by the relationship of these to the way the state spatially organises and controls at a political level" (Britain 2013). Social space is constituted by social structures of interaction that include practices of production, use and appropriation of the physical-material space by individuals or collectivities (Läpple 1991). It also implies a system of institutional and normative regulation that coordinates these social practices. Individuals (i.e. speakers) occupy relative positions based on principles of differentiation, power relations and unequal distribution of economic, social or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990).

- The *mental order* of space refers to the meanings, beliefs and attitudes that shape the way speakers perceive spatial realities and the environments in which they live. It points to the symbolic and cognitive dimension of space (Caravedo 2014) and includes the ways in which speakers make sense of their own spaces or those of others. The perception of space constructs and is constructed by imaginary geographies (Said 1979) that not only determine the conception of physical and social spaces but also influence the modes of interacting in and with them.

All three orders are mutually irreducible and only in their combination constitute spatiality (Britain 2013). This pluralistic understanding of space aims to overcome the problems of spatial dualism, widely discussed in human geography during the 1980s. Instead of reducing space to the tension between absolute and relative space, it should be conceived as neither objectively real nor conceptually arbitrary in the sense of pure cognition (Glückler 2002). In this regard Simmel's (1983 [1903]: 221-222) observation in his essay on the sociology of space is revealing: "Ein geographischer Umfang von so und so vielen Quadratmeilen bildet nicht ein großes Reich, sondern das tun die psychologischen Kräfte, die die Bewohner eines solchen Gebietes von einem herrschenden Mittelpunkt her politisch zusammenhalten"[1]. Thus, between the psychological forces of the subjects and the physical space exist social spaces and institutions, such as language, which contribute to give meaning to spatiality.

In linguistics, the emphasis on one of the three orders of space can help to define an approach without being reductionist. That is, epistemology does not necessarily reproduce ontology. Thus, linguistic geography or spatial linguistics focuses on the physical-material order by studying how linguistic phenomena are distributed in geography, relationships that are politically, socially and culturally conditioned (Coseriu 1955a), namely, different dimensions of social space and mental space. Perceptual dialectology (Preston 1989, Cramer 2016), on the other hand, epistemologically subordinates the physical-material and social orders to the mental order of space by analyzing how cognitive factors determine linguistic variation. For perceptual dialectology, the analysis of the beliefs and attitudes of speakers is an epistemological gateway to understanding linguistic practices, insofar as these are constituted by a wide range of valuations shared by speakers. This points to a socio-semiotic conception of space, according to which the symbolic dimension of space is understood as a construction involving both speakers (mental spaces) and collectivities (social spaces) (see the concept of place as meaning in Johnstone 2004).

How is space integrated into linguistic research?

Spatiality can be integrated into the study of language in a variety of ways. Dialectology, for example, uses *space as a methodological tool*, by means of linguistic geography and

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[1] "A geographical extent of so and so many square miles does not constitute a great empire, but the psychological forces which hold the inhabitants of such an area together politically from a ruling center do so."

geolinguistics in order to analyse the distribution of linguistic forms in the geographic space. Space is incorporated into the research linked to mapping and the representation of linguistic data, where space is "the blank canvas on which dialectological findings could be mapped" (Britain 2013). Quantitative dialectology addresses *space as a factor* in the form of quantifiable dimensions of space such as distance. One example of this is the use of gravity models for the analysis of the diffusion of linguistic innovations (Trudgill 1974, 1983). Other approaches to the study of dialectal variation, such as Labovian variationism, incorporate *space as a way of accessing* the processes underlying linguistic variation, for example by focusing on contact, change or conflict in urban spaces.

The different ways in which space is incorporated into the study of language largely reflect general trends in which social theory, from sociology and anthropology to human geography, has approached the role of space in its scientific programs. In this regard, it is important to consider the opposition between two epistemological approaches: on the one hand, *objectivism* understands space as an object that can function as *explanans* in causal models and whose status in the research design is that of an object of knowledge; on the other hand, *critical realism* understands space as a reality that cannot fulfill a causal function and therefore is embedded in research as a perspective (Glückler 2002). Space as perspective leads to an *epistemological contextualism* whereby spatiality is a contingency factor, understood as the condition of possibility of contexts, which could fulfill explanatory functions (Sayer 1985), so the contextual conditions can affect if and how certain factors and variables have causal effects on human behavior.

This contextualist spatial orientation is present in many linguistic concerns. This short introduction to the special issue is not the place to offer an exhaustive review of the different ways in which linguistics elaborates different modulations of space as perspective. However, it is worth briefly mentioning the spatial orientation of diverse fields and approaches in linguistics as the proposal for a linguistics of speaking based on the notion of "surrounding fields" developed by Coseriu (1955b), the study of multilingualism based on the polycentric concept of space as social context organizing linguistic patterns and practices (Blommaert et al. 2005), or the study of the evolution of language and contact based on the idea of ecology (Mufwene 2001, 2008).

The contributions to the special issue

All the contributions point to topics that could be framed within a spatial sociolinguistics and could delimit one of the aspects of a spatial orientantion in sociolinguistics (see Canagarajah 2018 and Badwan 2021).

Bonomi's contribution deals with the relationship between language and space from the point of view of mobility. By analyzing the narrative of a transnational speaker between Peru and Italy, the paper explores how the processes of spatial and sociolinguistic bordering enable us to address the complex interrelationships between language, identity, culture and territory. Expanding on the paradigm of the sociolinguistics of mobility (Blommaert 2010), the paper shows how migration implies processes of relocalization of language that may activate identity work of speakers and demonstrates how migration mobilizes changes in the three orders of spatiality (physical, social and mental). From the point of view of *space as perspective*, Bonomi applies a narrative ethnography that helps to focus on the meaning-making processes of the speakers triggered by deterritorialization. This methodology follows an epistemological corollary: moving from space to (multilingual) speakers, where space comes to be addressed from the speaker's point of view (mental space) and then reconstructing the links with the territory and the social space from the mental space. Here the notions of *agency* and *indexicality* become relevant conceptual tools to analyze spatiality through the subjectivity of speakers, especially considering that the processes of de-bordering and re-bordering occur in physical space, social space and mental space. Although from a methodological point of view the access to these processes prioritizes mental spaces, from an ontological point of view it is difficult to identify a hierarchy between the orders of space. Indeed, the processes of bordering taking place in all these spaces are interrelated, although they can be out of sync and some can activate each other in ways that do not depend on the features of the spaces involved, but on the experience of the speaker in them.

Space as a perspective has contributed greatly to approaching inequalities in sociolinguistics by defining two very general research interest: how does space organize language regimes? And how can space be understood as constitutive and agentive in organizing linguistic patterns and practices? (Blommaert et al. 2005). Haque's contribution to this special issue discusses several methods of approaching the dynamics of invisibilization of certain linguistic practices relegated to intimate spaces. The article invites us to reframe traditional questions of sociolinguistics related to the analysis of inequality of minority languages and their exclusion in private domains. To this end, emphasis is placed on language invisibility from the

point of view of family language policy. Based on the analysis of three types of invisibilized languages (secret languages, sacred languages and heritage languages) and with a regional focus on South Asia, this paper proposes three important ideas for an epistemology of language and space. First, family is understood as a social-contextual spatial unit in which the invisibilization of languages is articulated on the basis of a series of hierarchies that legitimize and regulate certain linguistic uses. Second, the paper mobilizes a concept of family as a social space, analysis of which can hardly be carried out solely with recourse to the private / public dichotomy by stressing the need to understand its relations with other social spaces such as formal or informal education, or political spaces. And third, the family is a social space governed by family language policies that are structured in 3 dimensions: practices, ideologies and management.

In his contribution, Kabatek proposes a reconsideration of the notion of isogloss ("the space where a linguistic phenomenon exists") based on a discussion of three widespread ideas that could contribute to an undermining of its epistemic value: there are no sharp dialect boundaries, only continuums; mobility makes the concept of isogloss anachronistic; and isoglosses are just abstractions that do not correspond to the real practices of speakers. Beside framing the concept in the history of the discipline, one of the strengths of the contribution is to reapproach the notion of isoglosses from a non-reductionist position of the spatiality of languages. Kabatek goes from the idea that space is created by speakers out of cultural behavior. Individuals are embedded in historical communities and are socialized in communication through historically existing sign meanings, but they also contribute to create communicative spaces with *boundaries* that are metonymically linked to geographical spaces. In this regard, mobility does not erase dialect boundaries as diatopic variation appears in the minds of the speakers. Indeed, spatial indexicality is an important part of the metalinguistic knowledge of speakers that underlies linguistic practices (for example, the salience of particular local or regional variants). In this sense, the dialectological exercise of describing (or reconstructing) dialect boundaries from the multi-layered overlapping of isoglosses, proposed by Kabatek, appears to be a powerful contribution to the study of languages in space and even languages on the move. Such a multi-layered dialectology starts from linguistic practices in order to reconstruct dialects, but should not abandon previous notions of real or perceived dialect boundaries: first, for epistemological reasons related to the limits of purely inductive methods, and second, because such notions are a constituent part of linguistic practices as they belong to the metalinguistic knowledge of the speakers.

A consideration of the epistemological questions of language and space would be incomplete without a reflection on quantification and measurement of space. In this sense, Moreno Fernández's contribution presents a methodological framework for the quantitative analysis of linguistic distances. One of the aspects that should be highlighted because of its epistemological relevance is the polysemy of the notion of space, understood on the one hand as the "extension" of linguistic uses and, on the other hand, as the distance between two languages. When specifying the concept of distance, two dichotomies must be taken into account: first, that it can be geographic (referring to territories), but also linguistic (referring to differences); and second, that distance can be real or fictitious. The main idea transmitted by the contribution is that both can be subject to measurement, although the different nature of real and fictitious distances requires different methods and approaches. In this vein, Moreno Fernández offers a review of the methods of measuring objective distances. The fundamental question discussed is whether boundaries can be delimited from observation (induction) or whether boundaries are hypotheses that are quantitatively tested (deduction). The paper presents the strengths and limits of different approaches to measuring distances between languages: by contrasting lexical or phonetic features or by comparing the difficulty of acquisition of a language by speakers of another language in terms of time or cognitive efforts. From the perspective of measuring fictitious distances, the paper proposes an innovative typology of varieties from the point of view of the mental space of the speakers: perceived varieties, i.e., those considered by the speaker exclusively in his or her subjective perception; conceived varieties, whose subjective differentiation is based on notions about how the varieties are or should be; and imagined varieties, when speakers focus on their belonging or not belonging to groups of speakers of one or another variety. The importance of incorporating cognitive methods that allow for quantification of these distances lies in the conviction that the perception of speakers can be integrated into explanatory models not only of linguistic phenomena but also of social phenomena that depend on linguistic-subjective factors, such as migration.

Last but not least, the contribution of Uth and Vanrell discusses the relationship between tourism and multilingualism based on a contrastive analysis of two touristified regions: the Yucatan Peninsula and Majorca. Tourism can be seen as one of the social phenomena that must be taken into account in the *mobilities turn* (Sheller 2017) as part of a sociolinguistics of mobility. Moreover, Uth and Vanrell's contribution shows that the field of study "sociolinguistics and tourism" (Heller et al. 2014) can benefit from the idea of space as a perspective. In this vein, the contrastive analysis proposed by the authors addresses the

intersections of three spatial phenomena: a) stratified multilingual spaces with their centers and scales; b) internal mobility of inhabitants of touristified places in terms of both horizontal mobility (internal displacements) and vertical mobility (of a socio-economic nature); and c) tourism as short-term mobility. The most important epistemological issue that emerges from the paper is the question of how to approach the effect of tourism on the linguistic ecology of touristified spaces. The descriptive-contrastive analysis of two spaces is proposed as a necessary step to study this effect. From a methodological point of view, the paper mobilizes a series of data and observations constructed from a combination of methods ranging from (digital) ethnography to demolinguistics and discourse analysis. In this sense, the paper reveals that the ontological plurality of spatiality can/should/has to result in methodological plurality.

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