

Seeing like the South – Undisciplined applied linguistics

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Abstract

The title of this talk plays with the title of James Scott's (1999) well-known book *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Conditions Have Failed*. While Scott's main target of critique is "development theory" and scientific interventions for the improvement of human life, my object of interest is applied linguistics and its social engagement. In doing so, I want to recast Alastair Pennycook's (2001) call for applied linguistics "as a form of *antidisciplinary* knowledge, as a way of thinking and doing that is always questioning, always seeking new schemas of politicization" (173). At this historical juncture, such a new schema of politicization emerges out of current discussions in the social sciences and the humanities about the notion of the South as (1) a heuristic lens through which to understand current historical phenomena, and (2) an epistemological orientation that guides critiques of the Northern/Western bias of much scholarly theorizing.

Within the study of the role played by language in society, Rodrigo Borba, Ana Deumert, Kathleen Heugh, Caroline Kerfoot, Christopher Stroud and others have recently called for a Southern re-reading of a variety of phenomena that have concerned applied linguists. Against such a backdrop, this talk builds and expands on the existing scholarly conversation from and about the "South" in applied linguistics. It will do so by drawing on data collected in 2015 and 2016 during protest action in the tertiary education sector in South Africa, including actions in which I am not just a spectator, but an engaged participant. A Southern viewpoint will allow me to mount an argument about the (un)intelligibility of "undisciplined language" in South African tertiary education politics. A Southern viewpoint will also enable me to critically evaluate my own positionality, with its stakes, gains and pitfalls, as a white, middle-class, non-South African male academic based in a Southern context. Ultimately, the talk will argue for an *undisciplined* applied linguistics that is deeply *troubling* and *unsettling*, not only of received knowledge, but also of researchers' investments in the interventions they are calling for.