
(doi: [10.1080/14708477.2020.1729786](https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1729786))

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Deposited on: 12 February 2020
Intercultural Research and Social Activism

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Abstract

In this introductory paper, we argue for a stronger link between language and intercultural communication research, theory development, and social/political action. We aim to reignite the debate about our role as public transformative intellectuals and to let advocacy and empowerment be embedded in our work. This calls for a shift in focus from the elite groups who have dominated the intercultural narrative to disenfranchised groups like refugees and (forced) migrant workers. We also reflect on our multi-positionality as scholars, and we present a dialectics of language, intercultural communication and social activism. Finally, we introduce the 12 papers that comprise the Special Issue.

Abstract (non-English)

\textbf{Keywords:} intercultural research; social activism; advocacy and empowerment; disenfranchised groups; public intellectuals

Introduction

Like most humanities and social science disciplines, language and intercultural communication research has generally made little attempt to integrate its research agenda with current social and political issues. Reflecting on his role as a language scholar and social activist, Rickford (1999) claims that a ‘Not-in-my-backyard’ attitude has been typical for the way many applied linguists have approached the great language debates of our time and their applicability to social and political issues. This attitude, he argues, may have been motivated by fear that socio-political issues may ‘distract us from the theoretical and descriptive research we consider our bread and butter (if not our fame and fortune), that they will devour our time and dilute our expertise, or that they will lead us into unchartered waters for which our training and expertise provide little preparation’ (Rickford, 1999, p. 267). Some disciplines (like anthropology) have even warned scholars against getting involved in social advocacy work arguing that it would not only distract the researcher, but potentially jeopardise the research agenda (Harvey, 1992).

We come to write this introduction at a point in time when protest movements are rising worldwide and there is renewed interest in different forms of activism, both in scholarship and in practice. Hong Kong has experienced massive, and increasingly violent, protests\textsuperscript{1} in recent months; and the results of the U.K. General Election returned a Government with polices that match those of the AFD in Germany and are of a strong and hardening right wing, anti-intercultural position. These threaten the
break-up of the U.K., and certainly the break up of Europe through Brexit. Anti-Brexit protests have become a regular and frequent aspect of both digital and civic life in the U.K, with the threat of violence having been carried out in the murder of an elected politician, Jo Cox M.P., and a climate of threatening xenophobia, increasingly directed towards those who use languages other than English in public. As recent protests have exemplified, young people, and those seeking refuge or living in poverty, or with disability, and those who speak languages which may not be the language of the dominant political group, have been most affected by oppressive conditions. And through these times, it is clear that language has played a key role in shaping protest and in forming the falsehoods through which power has been taken and consolidated. This is maybe fertile ground for the writing of articles and consideration of how language works in the mouths of the most powerful, but also how it works contextually in protest.

Lennon Walls with short messages supporting the democracy movement (such as ‘We love HK’; ‘Never give up’, ‘We are One’, and ‘Free HK’) have appeared in train stations, restaurants and other public places in Hong Kong during the 2019 protests. ‘Get Brexit done’ and ‘Go back to where you came from’ have been the propagandist slogans let loose and writ large through acts of xenophobia and verbal racial and linguaphobic abuse throughout the Brexit debates and the 2019 General Election Campaign. It is clear that such discursive productions and their effects require scholarly attention. The question we are pursuing in this Special Issue is to what extent such contexts need applied linguists, anthropologists, and political discourse analysts to make their work and teaching more widely available, and to engage in non-violent protest and policy-making.

Decentring multi-positionality
From ‘a European working in Hong Kong’, to ‘a U.K. Citizen living in Scotland, and working, at time of writing, in Aotearoa New Zealand’, there is clearly a need for us to decentre our own multi-positionality. In Decolonising Multilingualism, Phipps (2019) elaborates on ways in which the multiple ways of introducing oneself as a subject in the Māori ‘mihi’ greeting allow for a decentring of the single position and connection to others on more equal terms. For language to do its social labour as ‘speech acts’ (Austin, 1975) and to engage in social action interculturally, then clearly some degree of reflexive decentring is required of the positions the authors hold. In Aotearoa New Zealand, and in Australia, there are now codified ritual pieces of language to open and close events, for example acknowledging country as in this instance at the University of New South Wales:

I would like to acknowledge the Bedegal people that are the Traditional Custodians of this land. I would also like to pay my respects to the Elders both past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are present here today. And to acknowledge that the Aboriginal People never ceded sovereignty and that Australia always was, is and will be Aboriginal Land.
Equally, the use of the ‘mihi’ and ‘karakia’ in Aotearoa is a culmination of much social action, condensed into the symbols of ritual language, to remind and continue the work. These speech acts can be critiqued for being formulaic and often in a perfunctory manner, but their aim is language as social action, working to acknowledge and decentre or recentre the speakers and listeners on more equal terms than history has allowed.

In contemporary debates, a new form of decentring ‘speech act’ is emerging which both acknowledges positionality, but also acknowledges privilege. Increasingly both authors will have recourse to these ritualising, codifying forms which are solidifying their place as part of the work of critique and inclusion in the academy. We are white, European full professors at leading universities and these essentialised positions come with a great deal of essentialised privilege in many forms and were also gained as a result of the privileges in our pasts, and in the past of those who formed us. It is equally important to note that the ‘speech act’ which positions and acknowledges privilege for the purposes of the academy and also social activist gatherings is also one which masks other aspects of identity. Underlying the speech act is the question: ‘By what right might you stand here, and address us?’

Increasingly both authors take recourse to their positions as activists. Hans has long volunteered at a church shelter for domestic workers who have been abused, advocating through law and media. Alison is a long time activist for intercultural and social justice in refugee and migration rights in particular. These too are positions which are held by webs of privilege, education and choice. In acknowledging these and performing this speech act of multi-positionality in language, a decentring is also necessary, and is a part of the work language can achieve in social action. Hong Kong and the U.K. are not ‘the global South’, either geographically or metaphorically. The use of language and intercultural research for social action in these contexts is very different from the way scholars in other parts of the world might work with language. Human rights to free speech are not equally accorded and what can be said and how it can be said in scholarship is a fraught site of contest for academic freedoms.

Both of us work with scholars in contexts where we are regularly brought face to face with the stark reality of what it means to have academic and artistic freedom curtailed, sometimes through detention, sometimes through precarity, sometimes through deportation. As such, in exploring the ways in which language and intercultural communicative research might be socially engaged, we see the work of decentring the new multi-positionalities that are coming into view as critical. We also claim, with Austin, that language research and the speech acts studied by scholars are, in fact, often powerful ways of provoking and enabling change. This flows in two directions. Just as a well-researched stance in favour of greater compassion and reduced essentialism in discussions of others might act through its ‘speech’, so too, sadly, do the pronouncements of those who wish to demonise, and communicate anti-interculturally. Both forms are speech acts, and the critical examination of what harm is done by the latter, and what good can come from the former, is why we see this as an ethical enterprise which requires further work in our field.
**Research and social activism: Setting the scene**

There might be good reasons for scholars to avoid an open commitment to social and/or political activism, but some justifications appear to be convenient excuses more than anything. Mühlhäusler (1993, p. 123) argues that the expertise linguists possess is ‘really quite limited and much too shaky to be the foundation for solid expert opinion in most areas of linguistic application.’ This is blatantly untrue, as testified by numerous language scholars whose expert testimonies and opinions have impacted the way language is taught and used in classrooms, courtrooms and hospital wards around the world (Burland, 2015; Costa, 2012; Eades, 2005; Good, 2009). Not everybody has the resources to be involved in social activism, but, irrespective of the degree of our public engagement, one overriding principle could be applied to all language and intercultural communication research: if scientific knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing, also beyond the community of scholars (Cameron et al., 1992).

Rickford (1993, p. 130) aptly accounts for the dilemma many scholars find themselves in when they consider their research agenda and the social implications it might have vis-à-vis their other commitments as academics:

> Most of us fall short of paying our debts to the communities whose data have helped to build and advance our careers. Our grants typically include more money for paying data processors than data providers, and our intentions to pay back to the community in service often get lost in less escapable commitments and busyness of teaching, committee service and more research. It is not a picture, when we step back and view it, with which we can be proud.

What this points to as a phenomenon is the way in which the material conditions of life clash with the material conditions which enable scholarship to occur. Feminism has long pointed to the normative ways in which research tracks assumptions that shaped themselves through patriarchy, and which, whilst now being re-shaped in some parts of the world, nonetheless assume certain material conditions might support the production of research. For decades these included reliance on, for instance, a wife at home who undertook tasks such as childcare. It would be fair to say that the activism of the academic household in the last three decades has been engaged with the messy and difficult business of deconstructing and reconstructing such roles and assumptions, and the material conditions which sustain their normativity. At this present time, for example, Alison is engaged in industrial action in Higher Education in the U.K. focusing on pay and conditions, not least the precarious conditions of early career researchers, and on the notorious gender pay gap. What these conditions point to, as demonstrated by Bourdieu in *Pascalian Mediations*, is the extent to which the ‘freeing’ or reshaping of academic time and resource, which have traditionally focused on a detachment in scholarship, need to be re-ordered in order to produce material conditions from which socially engaged scholarship might flow, and change conditions in society for the better.
Notable attempts (particularly in sociolinguistics) to take research findings back to communities in the attempt to empower the people who generated the findings and to address specific social issues have been lauded in the literature (Fasold, 1999). Examples include Cameron et al. (1992), where a key assumption is that applied language research should be done not just on participants but, more importantly, for and with them. The same idea is prominent in Rickford’s (1999) attempts to use his research on African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) to influence educational policies in the USA, and in Watson and Smitherman (1996), who take their research on AAVE one step further by developing an educational programme that addresses the needs of underprivileged African-American youth in inner-city Detroit.

These attempts, however, have been few and far between and in recent years, not many language and/or intercultural communication scholars have tried to bridge the gap between research and theory development on the one hand, and the potential for social and political action that could ensue from this research on the other (see, however, Byram et al., 2016; Ladegaard, 2017; Phipps & Kay, 2014; Phipps, 2019). This is regrettable because, as Barrett (2016) argues, the world today is in desperate need of people who are interculturally and democratically competent and committed to a social justice agenda, which practices ‘respect for the inherent dignity and rights of all human beings, [and] respect for others as equals irrespective of their specific cultural affiliations’ (p. i).

With this Special Issue, we wish to focus on translational research in language and intercultural communication. We aim to bring together scholars who discuss how we might be able to move from talking about intercultural communication and social injustice, to doing intercultural communication and promoting a social justice agenda. We think this is timely for several reasons. First, there seems to be a move in academia worldwide away from ‘research for research’s sake’, and a one-sided focus on a positivist empirical approach, to an appreciation of social impact, i.e. how research can benefit and empower people outside academia, and a consideration of participatory approaches. Evidence of this move can be seen in the various research assessment exercises that more and more countries adopt in which social impact is assessed and rewarded. However, the way in which ‘impact agendas’ are conceived is often a long way from the kinds of social impact which are part of the principles and aspirations of many researchers in language and intercultural communication. Second, and far more importantly, we argue that the role of the public/transformative intellectual, as outlined and discussed by prominent scholars like Edward Said, Achille Mbembe, Francis Nyamnjoh, Noam Chomsky and Henry Giroux, has been largely ignored for too long. Academia has become a neoliberal endeavour with a one-sided focus on increasing student numbers and an insatiable demand for more publications, grant income and citations.

With this Special Issue, we want to reignite a debate about our role as critical intercultural communication scholars and public intellectuals. Lastly, we argue that the ever-increasing disparity in wealth and opportunity between the global North and the global South, as evidenced by refugees and forced migrant workers on the move, calls for scholars to recommit to a social justice agenda. This means bringing to the
forefront the skewed narrative that has characterised much language and intercultural communication research, a renewed commitment to our role as critical scholars and public intellectuals, and a discussion of social justice as it relates to concepts like ethics, advocacy and responsibility. We will make an attempt at this endeavour in the next part of the paper.

A skewed narrative
Language and intercultural communication research has relied heavily on evidence from elite groups travelling for business, education or tourism (MacDonald & O’Regan, 2012). The experiences of these elite travellers have produced universalised narratives of the increased opportunities for social advancements brought about by globalisation and increased mobility, and, as a positive spinoff, the acquisition of intercultural competence and citizenship and a more global mindset (Byram, 2008; Jackson, 2015). Whilst elite travellers are far from a homogeneous group, and displaced or forced migratory groups may well include those with means, so far, disenfranchised groups like unskilled migrant workers, those seeking refuge or humanitarian assistance, sex workers and other victims of human trafficking have not featured strongly in intercultural narratives. And when language scholars do engage with marginalised vulnerable groups such as domestic migrant workers (e.g., Lorente 2018), they rarely attempt to translate their research findings into social action. With this Special Issue, we argue that, in order for us to enable more inclusive thinking about intercultural communication and globalisation, and the effect it has on people’s lives, we need to sharpen the lens on the experiences of marginalised disempowered groups and let their voices be heard and their sacrifices recognised (Ladegaard, 2018; 2019).

There are now an estimated 232 million migrants in the world, more than during any previous time in human history, and the number is expected to rise further because of the increasing economic disparities between the global North and the global South, and because of violent conflicts in many parts of the world (United Nations, 2013). The significant increase in contact between people from different countries is also caused by international trade, which has nearly doubled from US$13 trillion in 2005 to nearly US$24 trillion in 2014 (United Nations, 2015). However, as Barrett (2016) points out, other statistics reveal that globalisation with its increased levels of contact between countries and people has not led to greater intercultural understanding, nor an increased sense of social justice. For example, data collected in Europe reveal increasing levels of prejudice, discrimination and hate crimes against ethnic and religious minorities, and a 2014 survey found that almost half of the respondents in seven European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain and the U.K.) admitted to having anti-Muslim views (Barrett, 2016, p. ii). Thus, hundreds of thousands of refugees from war-torn, impoverished Middle-Eastern and African countries, who have fled their home countries in recent years to seek a better future in Europe, have only experienced further rejection and alienation upon their arrival.
Similar scenarios are visible throughout Asia where developing countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Myanmar have experienced mass exoduses of migrant workers who flee poverty and social deprivation in their home countries to seek better opportunities and a chance to provide for their families in more affluent countries. Every year, around 400,000 new migrant workers leave Indonesia to work overseas as this is the only way they can provide for their family’s financial needs. Around 80% of them are women and they work as domestic helpers in the Middle East, or in more affluent societies in Asia. However, many of them experience exploitation and abuse, working under slave-like conditions in countries, which, in many cases, have no migrant labour laws to protect them (Ladegaard, 2019).

The growing sense of nationalism and protectionism that has characterised the political debate in recent years has further enhanced discourses of elitism and social and cultural dominance. It has become legitimate for political leaders to refer to people from other cultural and religious groups as undesirable aliens, and thus, it has become legitimate to exploit them further, or to bar them from entering your country. For instance the former Prime Minister of the U.K., David Cameron, spoke of refugees ‘breaking into our country’ rather than of people exercising their human right to seek asylum. And the present Prime Minister of the U.K. spoke of Muslim women as ‘letterboxes’ and of people from the continent of Africa as ‘piccaninnies with watermelon smiles.’ Racism has come out of the closet; it no longer needs to be hedged, mitigated or excused. The elite intercultural language studies of the 1990s and 2000s offer neither frameworks for effective social justice in action, nor adequate theorising in the face of rising racism. Therefore, perhaps more than ever before, there is a need for:

much greater respect for the inherent dignity, needs and rights of all human beings; a willingness to engage with those who are perceived to have other cultural affiliations; a willingness to speak out against expressions of prejudice and intolerance; a willingness to defend those who are disempowered and disadvantaged; and a willingness to take civic or political action for the greater good if this is required. In short, active intercultural democratic citizenship is required (Barrett 2016, p. iii).

Thus, recent social and political events, such as the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe, the increase in human trafficking on a global scale, as well as the shocking number of abuse cases against foreign domestic workers, call for researchers to engage not only in language and intercultural communication research on and about disenfranchised groups, but also for and with them. This requires critical and indigenous methods, creative approaches and a framing of the collection and analysis of data from within a wider ethical frame than hitherto present within intercultural methods. There is always a risk of dichotomous thinking or critiques in discussions of language and intercultural communication and this Special Issue presents work which both acknowledges this, works within the confines of the stark data on inequalities, but also actively pursues lines of enquiry relating to transformational research which is
taking the field into new areas. This, we argue, calls for a renewed commitment to our joint role as scholars and public, transformative intellectuals.

**Intercultural communication scholars and public intellectuals**

In his renowned essay, ‘The Responsibility of Intellectuals’, Noam Chomsky argues that because of the unique privileges intellectuals enjoy, they also have a responsibility to speak up: to expose the lies of governments and to analyse the causes, motives and hidden intentions behind political decisions. They are in a position to do that, he continues, because of the facilities they enjoy and the training they have received which will help them expose ‘the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us’ (Chomsky, 1987, p. 60). Chomsky further argues that the main concern of intellectuals should be their role in the creation and analysis of ideology. He quotes Daniel Bell (1960) who refers to ideology as ‘the conversion of ideas into social levers’, and ‘a set of ideas, infused with passion, … [which] … seeks to transform the whole way of life’ (Bell, 1960, quoted in Chomsky, 1987, p. 72). Bell argues that intellectuals in the West have lost interest in converting ideas into social levers. Thus, Chomsky concludes, intellectuals are content with tinkering with their way of life here and there and see no need to try to bring about radical change – and with this consensus, ‘ideology is dead’ (Chomsky, 1987, p. 52).

Another strong proponent of the intellectual’s role as a critical public voice is Edward Said (1994). He argues that ‘there is no such thing as a private intellectual’ (p. 12): the minute we put words on paper and publish them, we have entered the public sphere and are responsible for honouring what he calls our calling as intellectuals. Our primary role as public intellectuals, according to Said (1974, p. 11) is:

- publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.

Thus, Said (1974) argues, public advocacy is our responsibility as intellectuals. We do what we do because of universal principles: ‘that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously’ (pp. 11-12). We have a ‘vocation for the art of representing’ (p. 13), whether we speak in public, teach, write, or appear on TV.

Said (1974, p. 94) is not blind to the immensely challenging nature of this responsibility. The problem is that while everyone ‘professes to a liberal language of equality and harmony for all’, the challenge is that the intellectual needs to ‘bring these notions to bear on actual situations’ (and people) where the gap between the
alleged equality and justice on the one hand, and ‘the less edifying reality on the other’ is significant. This schism is at the core of this Special Issue: it exemplifies, through case studies from around the world, how certain groups (and peoples) are excluded from notions of equality and harmony. It is the untold, or neglected, stories of these disenfranchised groups that need to be brought to the forefront of language and intercultural communication research in order for us to move forward in our thinking about globalisation (Ladegaard, 2018). And if we as scholars have access to these stories, we have an obligation to tell them. As argued by another outspoken public intellectual, Henry Giroux (2009), it should be every intellectual’s moral obligation to speak up for the weak and undefended, and also to make them aware of their own power as individual and social agents.

Another important mission for the public intellectual is to ‘speak truth to power.’ This involves exposing hidden agendas and abuses of power and publicly criticising unjust immigration laws and inhumane refugee policies, for example. It often requires willingness for us ‘to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant’, and it involves ‘both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability’ (Said, 1994, p. 12-13). This is not an easy task, and for some academics, it involves considerable risk. In the current climate in Hong Kong, for example, where pro-democracy activists are fighting against what they see as anti-democratic laws restricting people’s freedom of expression and assembly, some mainland academics working in Hong Kong have had their Home Return Permit revoked for publicly supporting the pro-democracy demonstrations. Thus, we need to acknowledge that speaking up comes with considerably greater risk for some than for others.

The celebrated notion of speaking truth to power has also been criticised for turning the problem on its head. Arundhati Roy (2004, p. 68) argues: ‘Isn’t there a flaw in the logic of that phrase – speak truth to power? It assumes that power doesn’t know the truth. But power knows the truth as well, if not better, than the powerless know the truth.’ For the purpose of this Special Issue, there are at least two implications of Roy’s comment. First, that public truth-telling is important and should be part of all social action (Herman, 1998). Shuman (2005, p. 162) argues along the same lines and reminds us that narratives of suffering ‘insist, sometimes even more explicitly than the scientific rationale [behind the study], on knowledge as redemption and on the possibility that telling untold stories might make a better world.’ Second, Roy’s comment also implies that we share our knowledge with ‘the powerless’. This could mean taking the research back to the communities that gave us access to their stories. By sharing our research with them, we might help them see how their lives have been shaped by unfair discriminatory laws and by other people’s prejudice (see Burford-Rice et al., this issue). This might help them (re)discover their own resources, which may have been damaged by other people’s demeaning discourses about them and show them their own power as individuals and social actors (Giroux, 2009). These issues call for renewed attention to, and critical reconsideration of, our dual roles as researchers and social activists.

**Ethics, advocacy and empowerment**
The positivist empirical approach is still dominant in much humanities and social science research. This approach tends to consider research participants as ‘subjects’ who get selected for their ability to provide the researcher with certain types of knowledge. Thus, researchers do research on their subjects, rather than for and with them, and this, as Cameron et al. (1992, p. 15) point out, is problematic because ‘Human subjects deserve special ethical considerations, but they do no more set the researcher’s agenda than a bottle of sulphuric acid sets the chemist’s agenda.’ There might be several reasons for this, in our opinion, misperception. First, research councils to which academics submit their research proposals often require testable hypotheses to be stated and clear unequivocal answers to these hypotheses to be delivered. This means there is no room for an inductive approach where no hypotheses or preconceived ideas about the data are stated, and where researcher(s) and participants co-construct the research agenda and the data. Second, the positivist empirical approach has favoured the idea that there should be a distance between the researcher and his/her ‘subjects’ in order to avoid any interference with the research agenda, or any bias on the part of the researcher (Holliday and MacDonald, 2019).

The papers in this Special Issue take a different approach. They assume that knowledge is shared and co-constructed between researchers and participants. In a social constructivist framework, participants and researchers discursively construct reality together. This also means a rejection of the sharp distinction between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’ because it reinforces the misguided perception of a knowledgeable researcher who works on, and later empowers, powerless subjects by giving them access to information about themselves they did not have (Ladegaard, 2017). We argue against this simplistic understanding of advocacy and empowerment. We have both worked with disenfranchised groups who might be seen as powerless: people seeking refuge and humanitarian assistance in the U.K. (Alison), and domestic migrant workers in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Indonesia (Hans), but we argue that these people are not powerless per se. Some of them have been silenced by inhumane treatment and other people’s prejudice, which may lead to powerlessness and vulnerability. But others are resourceful and strong and capable of fighting for their rights. Many Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, for example, are able to use their educational background, their Christian faith, and their superior English language skills to their advantage (Ladegaard, 2020a).

So while we are sceptical of the need for research participants to be ‘empowered’, we argue that what often leads to powerlessness and vulnerability for migrant workers and refugees is the fact that they do not have a voice in the societies in which they live. Their refugee status makes them perpetually vulnerable and reminds them of their status as guests who rely on the ‘hospitality’ of their hosts (Derrida, 2000; Vigouroux, 2019); and domestic migrant workers are denied the rights that apply to other immigrants. Thus, there are severe structural constraints that work against disenfranchised groups, and this is where intercultural communicative language research can make a difference by giving voice to their stories. This, we argue, is the potential of advocacy work. ‘Powerful’ and ‘powerless’ are relative concepts, and to suggest that the researcher is always in a position to empower his/her participants
would be wrong. Power is complex and contextual and we should therefore not try to identify a fixed static group of powerless people but rather ‘be attentive to the complexities of power in situations into which we might be researching’ (Cameron et al., 1992, p. 21).

Labov (1982) argues that there are two overriding principles for researchers’ advocacy work: ‘error correction’ and ‘debt incurred.’ The first principle refers to the misinformation that often spreads in society about disenfranchised groups. This happens through the media (Jenks & Bhatia, this issue), or through the negative stereotypes about outgroup members that exist in any society (Ladegaard, 2020b), and, as Labov (1982) points out, scholars who have studied these communities often have the knowledge to correct these erroneous beliefs. The second principle refers to the debt that any researcher has to the people who provided him/her with stories about their lives (or other types of data). We should use this knowledge to benefit the community and speak on their behalf when they need it. Thus, scholars can ‘empower’ marginalised groups by giving them arguments they can use to counter prevailing wisdom, publicly or in their own minds (Cameron et al. 1993, p. 143).

However, it is of paramount importance that what we bring to the table is their stories and their reality, not our attempts to retell their stories. As Sorrells (2013, p. 234) argues:

Too often, people in positions of greater social, economic, and political power develop visions and actions with the intent of ‘helping’ disenfranchised groups. Yet if the voices, needs, and experiences of marginalized groups are not at the table, the process and outcome of the effort repeat and reinforce rather than rectify injustices.

The life stories of many migrant workers and refugees are unsettling and they often violate listeners’ expectations. People do not want to hear unsettling stories of human-inflicted trauma, and, as Harvey et al. (2000, p. 294) argue, ‘if they cannot avoid listening, they prefer coherent stories, ones that make sense by following a culturally-preferred plot from a state of suffering and pain to one of wholeness and recovery.’ But these are not the stories told by refugees and migrant workers, and if we want to help them towards recovery and recognition, we need to hear what our participants have to say.

**A dialectics of language, intercultural communication and social action: Gadamer’s praxis revisited**

We do not aim to give a full account of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics (see Lawn, 2006 for a comprehensive review), but to propose what we think might be a useful way forward for language and intercultural communication scholars working with disenfranchised groups. We need an approach that combines research commitments with an ethically responsible social activism agenda, which encourages intervention at the socio-cultural and political levels whenever possible. One reason we think Gadamer’s work is useful for language and intercultural communication research is the key role attached to dialogue. It argues that we live in and through
linguistic practices (Roy & Oludaja, 2009) and thus, it shares common ground with social constructivism, which sees narrative meaning as discursive constructions. Gadamer (1975) claims that ‘genuine dialogue’ has the potential to be transformative and should embrace qualities such as respect, trust, openness and freedom of expression. Whilst his use of ‘genuine’, in the wake of poststructuralism, sits awkwardly as a term, we believe it to be necessary as allowing a distinction between the cosmetic exercises in ‘listening’, ‘consultation’ or ‘dialogue’ (Phipps, 2014) and the kind of communication Buber (1958) describes in I: Thou, (Ich und Du) which is also present in this important distinction made by Gadamer. He argues that transformative dialogue begins with recognition of our own prejudices and willingness to confront them; this recognition opens up the possibility for understanding, and understanding ultimately results in praxis (action) (Roy & Oludaja, 2009, pp. 259-260).

Another reason that Gadamer’s notion of praxis is applicable to the work presented in this Special Issue is its moral dimension. It involves a genuine concern for the wellbeing of other human beings and therefore underlines the need for moral judgement as an integral part of our research agenda. A Gadamerian approach to humanities and social science research would embrace non-positivistic participatory frameworks and advocate intervention and social activism. It is an approach to scholarship that considers more than just the appropriateness, validity and reliability of methods; it involves the ‘making of responsible political and practical decisions about happiness, health, peace, [and] freedom’ (Gadamer, 1975, p. 313). This of course also means a rejection of research participants as subjects/objects. Gadamer argues against the dehumanising nature of positivist research, which he sees as objectifying people. Researchers, he argues, should not be limited to reporting on people but should engage with them in participatory research, which ultimately seeks to liberate them from oppression.

Much language and intercultural communication research could be subjected to similar criticism. It reports on people’s languages and (inter)cultural experiences as global citizens in a particular part of the world but it rarely engages with wider socio-political issues. It lacks what Gadamer (1975) calls sympathetic understanding, or what we call ‘the empathy that leads to action’ (Ladegaard, 2017, p. 180). Praxis moves beyond reporting, and it moves beyond descriptions of language, culture and identity and their intersections as we have seen in hundreds of studies. It advocates research for and with disenfranchised groups and it recognises that this type of research requires a strong ethical component committed to building solidarity and to fight against oppression and injustice. This means research becomes a situated practice which must include morally grounded action aimed at fairness and justice.

A final point Gadamer (1975) makes about our role as morally responsible researchers is that genuine understanding of the cultural Other happens only through dialogue, and this dialogue includes a willingness to redefine our position. This call seems perhaps more pertinent today than ever before in the last 50 years of language and intercultural communication research. With growing nationalism, xenophobia and anti-immigration discourses spreading and taking root in countries across the world,
the call for scholars to engage in genuine transformative dialogue and promote praxis is of the utmost importance. Too much research never leaves the confines of university offices and classrooms, and never gets beyond publication in academic journals. As socially responsible, praxis-oriented and critical intercultural communication scholars, we must continuously seek to form stronger links between the theories we want to develop and practice/change in the communities we study. We hope that this Special Issue will reopen this important debate and encourage more transformative scholarship and praxis.

Overview of themes
The Special Issue opens with Christopher Jenks and Aditi Bhatia’s paper, ‘Infesting our country: Discursive illusions in anti-immigration talk.’ It explains the present expressions of xenophobia and anti-intercultural discourse, namely the discursive frameworks which underpin the illusions in anti-immigration talk. From ‘I’m not racist but…’ refrains through a range of presentations, Jenks and Bhatia demonstrate the groundlessness of the talk, the chimera of the faux presentation, the false narrative which underpins such discourse and the structures holding it in place. They build on the Discourse of Illusion framework (Bhatia, 2015) and apply this to print and online media. What is being presented is well known, empirically from data, discursively from critical discourse analysis and ‘on the street’. What is new in the framing here for our purposes is the focus on social action. This is not the scholarship of social action which finds itself in the midst of protests, though it may do through its inventiveness, but rather the careful, forensic revealing of how negative political discourse is constructed and mobilised against those living precarious lives in cross-border contexts.

Moving from the genre specific discussion of anti-immigration discourse in mainstream print and online newspapers, Rose Burford-Rice, Martha Augoustinos and Clemence Due’s paper, “That’s what they say in our language: one onion, all smell”: The impact of racism on resettlement experiences of South Sudanese women in Australia’, focuses empirically on the felt and lived experiences of women who suffer both the media discourse and also other forms of racism. In a study of refugee-background South-Sudanese women which sought to examine help-seeking practices, this research found the participants being led back to mental distress suffered because of racism. What was written in the anti-immigrant press led to distress the affect of this group of women. The authors work to explore the difficulties such research provokes for socially engaged researchers and their ethical dimensions. They begin to trace ways in which gaps between academic research and activism might be bridged and call for media reflexivity and political action, joining their own research to a wealth of findings which demonstrate how profoundly damaging anti-immigrant and racist discourses are to those who have settled as refugees.

The paper by Emily Greenbank and Meredith Marra, ‘Addressing societal discourses: Negotiating an employable identity as a former refugee’, sets out with a socially engaged research design to consider what might be required for refugees to have more positive experiences of seeking employment as part of their settlement in
Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Through a focus on refugee background employees, they show the way the ‘Discourses’ (Gee’s capitalisation, 1990) of Refugeehood may have been held previously, such as Narratives of Flight, and how the experiences of refugeehood then change the subjects’ own narrative construction of identities and their narrated sense of agency. Importantly, the authors subject their own interrogations to critical analysis and show how their research participants repeatedly resist various attempts to frame their experiences. Social engagement emerges from this research with a focus on bi-directional narrative change and a critical lens on the Discourses of Refugeehood which act as barriers.

The next paper, ‘From surviving to thriving: ‘Success stories’ of highly skilled refugees in the UK’ by Sara Ganassin and Tony Young, reports on the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe. However, as this paper shows, if refugees are allowed to use the skills they have, their experiences might become stories of successful reintegration into the labour market. The research also shows that the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence, as well as appropriate language competencies, are important for refugees’ and migrant workers’ ability to reintegrate. The paper reports on highly skilled refugees, a group which is both elite (because of their background) and marginalised (because of their displacement), but still a comparatively resourceful group capable of drawing on their past experiences and educational background to succeed in the host country. The majority of refugees are less privileged, and the authors therefore conclude that unless legislation and public discourses about refugees change, the success stories reported in this paper will remain exceptions.

Postcolonial discourse analysis is the focus of Caterina Scarabicchi’s paper, ‘Migrant manifestos in the 2010s: Performing border dissent between social action and Utopia.’ The author subjects some of the numerous charters and manifestos for action in migration contexts to critical analysis as part of a postcolonial ‘canon’. The paper examines how dissent is performed in specific speech acts produced in context at borders and how the political statements these encapsulate represent a contact zone between social action and utopianism. It is easy for scholars to believe that a socially engaged scholarship in LAIC will mean speaking up and speaking out, presenting research findings to policy makers, the press or the public, but in this paper it is activist communities who stand to learn from the analysis of the work and utterances of researchers.

In the next paper, ‘Lessons in response-ability: Supporting social encounters by doing language’, Lavinia Hirsu also takes a performative and critical intercultural dialogic approach to her evaluation of the ‘Sharing lives, Sharing Languages’ project. This develops the focus on social action in a new direction where academic research is brought to bear on a programme undertaken by NGO and Government agencies as an experience in social action itself, namely to locate language learning practices surrounding integration of refugees and hosts in communities. The contribution of academic activism here is embedded in the ‘thought act’ and speech act of theorising and clarifying more widely what the ethical and rhetorical effects are of a change in both policy and practice. For those academics engaged in policy making, this is
indeed a service enabling the analysis and evaluation to widen in perspective, and in responsive actions.

Research on social justice in migration contexts has largely focused on European migrations, or migration into Anglophone or Francophone contexts in the global North. In the next paper, ‘Measuring the effectiveness of theory in action: Grass-roots initiatives and social justice for Japan’s Kurdish migrants, Anne Schluter takes undocumented migrants in Japan as the focus of her research into grassroots initiatives. Schluter’s aim is to understand how effective the application of theory-in-action might be. The work takes existing frameworks in the field for measuring and modelling social action in intercultural communicative situations, and examines their effectiveness for work with undocumented populations. The results are clear and show that when working with undocumented populations, the models developed with regularised migrant populations will be problematic and perhaps not applicable. Here the work opens out new vistas for research and for the development of new models of understanding and researching undocumented migrants.

In the next paper, ‘The role of stories in the design of an online course: Ethical considerations on a cross-border collaboration between the U.K. and the Gaza Strip’, Giovanna Fassetta, Maria Emperiale, Esa Aldegheri and Nazmi Al-Masri present research from the fraught context of the Gaza Strip, where intercultural research, pedagogy and experience are severely limited by the ongoing siege. Many models of intercultural interaction, also of social engagement in cross-border settings, rely on meeting and unravelling the complexities of intercultural communicative interactions face to face. Previous research (O’Dowd, 2005; Akiyama, 2017) has also focused on online collaborations, though largely with populations where this is chosen for expediency, not a requirement of circumstance of aggression and war. In the Gaza context, where face-to-face contact with international collaborators is impossible, the authors explore the development of narratives in the design of an online course, and ethical questions emerging from this, as they seek to ready more tactile, humanising dimensions to online learning which can enable intercultural dialogue and learning for people under siege.

Mark Nartey’s paper, ‘Voice, agency and identity: A positive discourse analysis of ‘resistance’ in the rhetoric of Kwame Nkrumah’, deals with political discourse analysis and moves the work to the African continent and an analysis of the discourse of resistance in the speeches of Ghana’s founder and first President, Kwame Nkrumah. The social action here stems from the outset in the choice of research subject and design, as this represents one of the first attempts at political discourse of African leaders, outside of South Africa, during the early postcolonial period. The disproportion of scholarship focusing on leaders in the global North is thus given immediate redress, and the reader is required to engage with work which is beyond the canonical European and North American fare.

Finally, we include commentaries and critical views from two scholars at different stages in their work, and writing from different standpoints in the field. Zhu Hua’s work in intercultural language study has focused greatly on social action, not least through her own advocacy for migrant rights and the rights of children to their mother
language. Hyab Yohannes is a scholar from Eritrea who has worked in legal refugee determination cases and for advocacy organisations and is now studying carceral environments for Eritrean refugees. Both scholars bring views which uphold the rich seams of critical scholarship in the Western tradition, with its logocentricities, but also open the volume up into new vistas of research and demonstrate the need for a wider view of the world than that which dominates our own field.

By way of an Epilogue, the volume closes with our own reflections on what might constitute a focus for the emergent field of social engagement and social action for language and intercultural communication research more generally.

As intercultural scholarship, all of the papers in this volume consider the border zones, contact zones and interstices of spaces created in ways, which are real or imagined between groups who have been marked out as distinct from one another. Whilst some of these markers are between refugees and non-refugees, others between, for example, Kurds and Japanese, between those under siege and those living in relative freedom, one theme of reflexivity characterises the work which was submitted for this Special Issue: the intercultural space between those paid to undertake academic work and those who are participants in it. This emerges as both a fruitful seam and one fraught with ethical dilemmas which test the limits of both institutional ethical frameworks and also methodological and theoretical assumptions. This confirms our original purpose in undertaking this issue, that here is work, in and through and with language, to be done.

Notes

1) A proposed extradition bill, which would allow the Hong Kong government to send offenders to Mainland China for prosecution, led to some of the biggest protests in Hong Kong’s history. On 9 June 2019 an estimated one million people took to the streets to protest against the extradition bill, and because the bill was not revoked, an estimated 2 million engaged in peaceful protests the following week. Three months later, the bill was eventually withdrawn, but protesters had new demands, including an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality, retracting the classification of protesters as ‘rioters’, amnesty for arrested protesters, and negotiations on democratic reforms (universal suffrage). At the time of writing, only one of the protesters’ demands has been met (the withdrawal of the bill), and the protests, which have become increasingly violent, are now entering their fifth month. It is widely believed that the Chinese government is behind Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s hard-line response to the protesters’ demands.

2) The intention in using the terms ‘North’ and ‘South’ is metaphorical, as a shorthand for the accepted representation of those areas privileged by world trade and world scholarship, and those most often overlooked.

3) It is important, for the purposes of the Special Issue, that progress is not equated with either alignment with policies of globalisation understood as unfettered economic growth, and that such ideas of progress come with substantial risk and damage to many (Spivak, 2012).
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