

Entanglements and Assemblages of English

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Abstract

This paper takes up the concepts of entanglements and assemblages of English as a way to understand the multiple ways in which English is connected to, and part of, social, cultural, political, and material worlds. This way of thinking is more useful than approaches to English that focus primarily on the language in isolation (even if pluralized or diversified) or alternatively look at English as a mere reflection of already-defined relations of political economy. A backstreet sign for an English school in the Philippines, for example, suggests an assemblage of tangled wires, cheap English, desire, neoliberal goals, English frenzy, domestic workers, call centers, social stratifications, and unequal resources. Implications for looking at English in Bangladesh along similar lines will also be discussed. Developing the ideas of assemblages and entanglements, this paper argues that new approaches to materiality and the interconnectedness of things can take us forward in a search for alternative ways of thinking about the distribution of unequal linguistic resources. The paper concludes with a discussion of the possibilities of disentangling English.

Keywords: assemblage, entanglement, English, decoloniality

Introduction: Entangled English

A key question if we want to understand the role, spread, and position of English in the world is how to deal adequately with the ways English (or any language) is interwoven with social, cultural, material, and political relations. The idea of *entanglements of English* aims to address the multiple ways that English is connected to all that surrounds it, from global political and economic forces to local relations of class, culture, and education, from the circulation of discourses and ideologies to the contextual dispositions of people, artefacts, and place. The need for such an articulation derives from the problem that the “surgical removal of language from context produced an amputated ‘language’ that was the preferred object of the language sciences for most of the twentieth century” (Kroskrity, 2000, p. 5). In order to construct itself as a respectable discipline, linguistics had to make an extensive series of exclusions, relegating people, history, society, culture, and politics to a role external to languages. To overcome this problem, the more grounded fields of socio- and applied linguistics adopted an idea of context as the preferred tool for understanding language and its surrounds, but context has never been a very well-theorized account of how to understand linguistic settings, providing little more than a backdrop for pre-



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existing languages; languages are whole and complete and are performed amid particular environmental factors.

The need for this articulation emerges from the constant demand to find adequate ways to deal with the politics of global Englishes. This is both an old and a new project. It is old to the extent that many of us have been trying to get at this question from a variety of perspectives for a long time. In trying to find ways to understand the interconnectedness of English and its surrounds (Pennycook 1994), I adopted Edward Said's (1983) use of the term worldliness. As a politically-engaged literary critic, Said's interest was in finding a way of dealing with a text that does not leave it as a hermetically sealed textual cosmos with no connection to the world, while at the same time avoiding the reduction of a text to its worldly circumstances. Linking Said's concerns to more general issues of language, the goal becomes one of finding a space between a view of language as an idealized, abstract system disconnected from its surroundings, and a materialist view of language determined by worldly circumstance. If, on the one hand, we focus on linguistic system alone, we not only miss all that matters around language, but arguably misconstrue what language is. If, on the other hand, we view language only as a manifestation of a prior materiality, we also miss the point that language plays a dynamic role in relation to the world around it. "Is there no way," Said (1983) asked, "of dealing with a text and its worldly circumstances fairly?" (p.35).

This, then, was the work that I wanted the idea of the worldliness of English to do: English could be understood as worldly not only by dint of its vast global expansion, but also in the sense that a person may be called worldly: it has been and is constantly in the process of being changed by its position in the world. English is in the world and part of the world: to use English is to engage in social action which produces and reproduces social and cultural relations. The worldliness of English referred both to its local and to its global position, both to the ways in which it reflects and constitutes social relations. This, then, has been a long process of trying to understand the ways in which English is always global and local, part of local struggles for communication and recognition, bound up with class, race, culture, gender, and education. This is also a new project, however, insofar as recent ways of thinking about relations among languages, places, things, and people have opened up innovative avenues for thinking about English (and other languages) and its relation to the world.

Here we can bring together both decolonial and new materialist ways of thinking. The world Englishes (WE) and English as a lingua franca (ELF) movements have both, in their own ways, sought to decolonize English by insisting that English is the property of all, that ownership of English no longer rests in the hands of its so-called native speakers, and that English can be understood as global, variable, and multilingual. Proponents of these two related programs have aimed to delink English from its origins and ownership and to shift the center of English from the Global North. While both have arguably achieved some success in this endeavor – making it possible to see English as locally inflected, as no longer encumbered by conventional decrees, as no longer tied to particular speakers and places – such gains have only been partial. Neither framework provides the tools to appreciate

the extent of the political and theoretical delinking that is necessary to decolonize English (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

Both the WE and the ELF approaches have been widely critiqued for lacking a sufficient politics to engage with either the global implications or the local politics of English (Bruthiaux, 2003; O'Regan, 2014; Rudwick, 2022). More politically engaged approaches, such as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 2009), meanwhile, have presented only a dystopian narrative of English domination, failing thereby to attend to the complex relations between English and its uses and users. A focus on *unequal Englishes* – “the unequal ways and situations in which Englishes are arranged, configured, and contested” (Tupas and Rubdy, 2015, p. 3; Tupas and Salonga, 2016) – partly addresses these concerns by keeping a focus on inequalities, pluralizing Englishes, grounding the analysis in local contexts of language use and highlighting the “coloniality of inequalities of Englishes” (Tupas, 2019, p. 531). As Kubota (2015) insists, we need to ask whether “all English users regardless of their racial, gender, socioeconomic, and other background” can “equally transgress linguistic boundaries and engage in hybrid and fluid linguistic practices” (p. 33).

This points to the need to raise ontological and decolonial questions. English arguably remains a language of the Global North both because it is embedded in the institutions and injustices created and maintained by the Global North, and because it remains ideologically a language framed in Global North terms. Talking of “Englishes” (even if unequal) does not take us far enough and cannot capture the “multilingual repertoire of speakers” or the “complex semiotic webs within and across which speakers move, comprising not just languages as we know them, but bits of language such as registers, accents, words, and *assemblages* of form-meaning elements, such as rap rhythms and embodied performances” (Williams, 2017, p.4, emphasis added). This paper asks how we can come to a better understanding of global Englishes if we focus not just on the translingual relations among English and other languages, but also among English and other entanglements. Developing the ideas of assemblages and entanglements, this paper suggests that new approaches to materiality and the interconnectedness of things can provide useful ways forward here.

Assemblages and Entanglements

The idea of entanglements of English aims to shift the sociolinguistic focus towards a more profound sense of interconnectedness. This is very different from the sociolinguistic trope of context, with its static relations between pre-given backgrounds and assumed languages; nor is it limited to a critical sociolinguistic or discourse analytic insistence that we have to focus on language in relation to power, class, capital, gender, race, and other social categories (though all these matter). Rather, by bringing together both old and new materialisms (Bennett, 2010), by questioning assumed divisions between humans and non-humans (Pennycook, 2018), between living and non-living existents (Povinelli, 2016), a notion of assemblages insists that we think again about how language relates to the world. For Tsing (2015), looking at the ways in which pine trees, mushrooms, and forest spaces cleared by humans cooperate with each other, thinking in terms of assemblages, urges us to ask how “gatherings sometimes become ‘happenings,’ that is, greater than the sum of their parts”

(p. 23). Assemblages, she argues, are “sites for watching how political economy works” not through a predefined operation of capital, but by the juxtaposition of people, things, and life trajectories (p. 23).

Toohy et al.’s (2015) study of sociomaterial assemblages brings a related focus on the complexity of sociolinguistic events to contexts of school literacy and collaborative production of digital video texts, asking “how human bodies, the physical setup of classrooms, classroom materials (furniture, books, paper, computers, and so on), discourses about teaching and learning, what is considered to be knowledge, school district policies, the curriculum, and so on are *entangled* with one another, and how they may be moving and changing together” (p. 466; emphasis added). This starts to bring together an interest in the “total linguistic/ semiotic fact” (Blommaert, 2017, p. 58; Pennycook, in press) – the multiplicity of factors that come together around people and place, those “dense and complex objects” that “are the ‘stuff’ of the study of language in society” (Blommaert, 2017, p. 59) – and recent directions in translinguistic theories that show how “personal, community, and spatial repertoires interact dynamically in the generation of meanings through distributed practice” (Canagarajah, 2021, p. 17).

A focus on semiotic assemblages has aimed to combine the complexity of “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett, 2010, p. 23) with a focus on how semiotic resources, artefacts, and places are assembled in particular moments (Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2017). Like Kerfoot and Hyltenstam’s (2017) exploration of the entanglements of North/South politics, epistemologies and histories in order to “illuminate the shifting structures of power and asymmetrical relations between North and South that render some types of knowledges, practices, repertoires, and bodies more legitimate, and therefore more visible, and thus construct different orders of visibility” (p.5), these approaches insist on both a politics of intersectionality and a politics of the material, assembling humans and non-humans, linguistic resources and material existents.

From this perspective, it is also possible to think of language itself as an assemblage. As Wee (2021) argues, this “affords significant advantages over the view of language as an autonomous bounded system. It provides a coherent account of regularities and fluidities in language while also being open to the idea of what actually constitutes ‘the linguistic’” (p. 16). Such assembled languages can be seen as part of broader language ideological assemblages that bring together different ways of knowing, accounts of language, relations to family, culture, land, and materialities (Kroskrity, 2021). Instead of reified languages and ideologies, the idea of assemblages allows “a more dynamic view of languages as continuously being reconstructed by their speakers” (Kroskrity, 2021, p. 131). By taking up a notion of entanglements, we can see how instances of language use may be connected to a range of factors, from artefacts to material surrounds, social relations to political economy, ideologies to discursive regimes; by looking at assemblages, we can see how different elements are pulled together around an utterance.

Entanglements of Wires and Desires

I have elsewhere discussed ways in which we can look at English in the Philippines along

these lines, starting with a focus on a sign for a local language school in a backstreet in Cebu (Pennycook, 2020, 2021). This sign, announcing “AGESL: Achieve Goal English as a Second Language” is connected in multiple ways to the world around it. Starting first with its physical emplacement, the location of this sign matters: it is on a backstreet in Banilad, Cebu City, in the central Philippines, surrounded by the bustle of cars, bikes, and Cebu jeepneys. Above the sign is a tangled expanse of electricity wires. The state and precarity of municipal wiring are often a good indicator of economic development (United Nations, 2006): the material relations between this sign and the wiring above it matter. For Bennett (2010), the “electrical power grid offers a good example of an assemblage. It is a material cluster of charged parts that have indeed affiliated, remaining in sufficient proximity and coordination to produce distinctive effects” (p. 24). Looking at the relations between English in the Philippines and the tangled wires behind the AGESL sign, and all they imply for electricity supplies, health, environment, and power, we can start to understand how English is part of the interconnected assemblage of the city (Amin and Thrift, 2017). Tangled wires are entangled wires, and English is part of those entanglements.

The sign is also, not surprisingly, for a private language school. This private-public tension around English echoes across the world. Whatever language policies are developed to place English in a balanced relationship with other languages, private language schools will frequently step into the gap, both reacting to, and creating a need for, English. Despite the partial resistance to the *grip of English* (Lorente 2013) and the associated emphasis on Standard American English and English-Only instruction (Canilao, 2019) through the development, at least at elementary levels, of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB MLE) (Amarles, 2016; Azurin, 2010; Cruz & Mahboob, 2018), a number of factors constrain this move away from English. Not least among these are private schools, and their constant reproduction of English language capital and desire.

These schools, such as the nearby “English Factory” – following a “strict protocol like a real factory,” where the teachers, “also known as manufacturers,” provide the “students with the best quality learning experience” (English Factory, 2019) – also cater for overseas students. The Philippines has become a cheap destination to learn English, and, like all processes of impoverishment, these are not mere accidents of history but a very clear result of political and economic policies in the 20th century that saw the Philippines change from a colony of the USA, to a part of the Japanese empire, and a cornerstone (basecamp) of US counter-communist operations. As a new destination for such English language learners, the Philippines markets itself as a place where “authentic English” is spoken, yet its real drawcard is that its English is “cheap and affordable” (Lorente and Tupas, 2014, p. 79). For countries where English has long been institutionally embedded – the so-called outer-circle – the possibility of marketing English as both a cheap and a second – even an authentic – language has opened up new commercial possibilities.

To dwell on this process in terms of language commodification (Duchêne and Heller, 2012) may be an observation that is neither very accurate from the point of view of political economy (Block, 2018), nor very remarkable when we consider that languages have long

been intertwined with trade and viewed in material terms. We need to look beyond a language commodification framework that assumes a political economy of language but fails to adequately account for processes by which language can be understood as a commodity, or to distinguish between commodification as discourse and as a product of labor (Petrovic & Yazan, 2021; Simpson & O'Regan, 2018). Of more significance are the ways this market is entangled with the regional economy, and particularly Korea, and is also about the production of desire.

The presence of Koreans in Cebu (and the Philippines more generally), where they make up a significant diasporic population, is connected to a number of factors, including affordability, desirability as a tourist destination, the presence of English, and the possibility of setting up small businesses, including English schools for Korean visitors (Garcia-Yap, 2009). When we ask to whom this sign – with its call to “achieve goal English” – is addressed, therefore, the answer is as likely to be Koreans as anyone else. It is no coincidence that it is the two principal regional client states of the USA that are buying and selling English. South Korea’s “frenzy” for English has driven people to remarkable extremes (from prenatal classes, to tongue surgery, to sending young children overseas to study). It is produced by a range of forces, from South Korea’s “close dependent relationship with the United States in trade, security, culture, and politics” (Park, 2013, p. 287) to its insertion into a neoliberal order and desire to compete in global economic terms. Local conditions of culture and class and “local ideologies and contingencies” (Park, 2013, p. 300) matter too, as do the close collaboration between government, business, and education sectors.

This “desire for English,” however, should not be seen in terms of “rational and economic logic” so much as “the deep *entanglements* of hopes, dreams, frustrations, and yearnings that constitute desire” (Park, 2021, p.59; emphasis added). Not only does the sign interpellate potential learners into discourses of the entrepreneurial self, reimagining the learner as “an assemblage of commodifiable elements ... a bundle of skills” (Urciuoli and La Dousa, 2013, p. 176, italics added), but it invites students to invest in “the elusive promise of English” as a form of “speculative capital” (Tabiola and Lorente, 2017, p. 133). This helps us to see how such a sign is not just a product of neoliberal economies but rather is part of an assemblage of governmental practices, and that to understand student investment in English, we have to look at their entangled hopes and dreams.

As Tajima (2018) clarifies, this “cheap English” also extends to the online Eikaiwa (English conversation) industry, where Japanese and Korean companies are able to offer cheap Skype (before Zoom) conversation classes using Philippine workers. These women – often college students or graduates – are paid around 50 pesos (US\$1) for a 25-minute lesson. As Tajima also observes, this is a highly sexualized domain, with predominantly male students learning from younger Filipinas. This in turn replicates a long history of Japanese male exploitation of Filipina women, from sex tours to bar “hostesses” and marriages between mainly rural Japanese men and Filipinas. We also, therefore, need to understand this “cheap English” not only within the neoliberal economics that breed call centers (Friginal, 2009; Rahman, 2009) and language schools, but also within a history of sexual exploitation of Filipina women.

English is often marketed in relation to a particular set of images of sexual desire, along with connections to travel, a White consumer lifestyle, and aspirational goals for learning English (Gray, 2010; 2012). English, as advertised for language schools and presented in textbooks, “emerges as a powerful tool to construct a gendered identity and to gain access to the romanticized West” (Piller and Takahashi, 2006, p. 69). As Motha and Lin (2014) contend, “at the center of every English language learning moment lies desire: desire for the language; for the identities represented by particular accents and varieties of English; for capital, power, and images that are associated with English; for what is believed to lie beyond the doors that English unlocks” (p. 332). Takahashi (2013) explains Japanese women’s desire for English, as “constructed at the intersection between the macro-discourses of the West and foreign men and ideologies of Japanese women’s life-courses in terms of education, occupation, and heterosexuality” (p. 144).

Focusing on the ways in which these discourses of desire implicate White Western men, Appleby (2013) shows how “an embodied hegemonic masculinity” is constructed in the Japanese ELT industry, producing as a commodity “an extroverted and eroticised White Western ideal for male teachers” (p. 144). Any understanding of the motivations to learn English, therefore, has to deal with relations of power not only in economic and educational terms but also as they are tied to questions of desire, gender, sexuality, and the marketing of English and English language teachers as products. The political economy of English and the possibility of cheap but authentic English are also, therefore, tied to very real material conditions of sexuality. English is thus entangled both with the political economy of tangled wires and the political embodiment of gendered desires.

Entanglements of Social Difference

The Philippine education system, as Ordoñez (1999) remarked some years ago, appears to be aimed at “supplying the world market economy with a docile and cheap labor force who are trained in English and the vocational and technical skills required by that economy” (pp. 19-20). English is bound up with the export of labor, and particularly, domestic workers (Lorente, 2017). Filipino workers can be found on boats and construction sites among many other workplaces, but it is in domestic and health care that many women work. These are the entangled relations of language, gender, domestic work, and migration. The export of domestic and other workers, and the importance of English in this process, affect language and education policies in the Philippines. These domestic workers now market themselves to prospective employers, while also having to deal with the local language politics of places such as Singapore. This is about Filipina women being inscribed into a neoliberal order of supermaids and scripts of servitude (Lorente, 2017).

Entangled with the class formations produced by neoliberal economies are the gendered nature of work and the ways this fits into patterns of domestic labor and transnational migration (Parreñas, 2001). Language, gender, and labor are already connected in complex ways (Gonçalves and Schluter, 2017). The position of the Philippines in the global economy requires a “cheap, female labour force that has a working knowledge of English” (Tinio, 2013, p. 221). These women – domestic workers, aged care workers, bargirls, singers,

English Skype teachers – “serve as the very foundations of the global economic order that oppresses them. The English that they speak, idiosyncratic as it is, serves as a not so silent witness of the tenderness, care, libido, pretense at/desire for an ease with Western culture that is imbricated into this oppression” (Tinio, 2013, p. 221). For Lorente (2017), scripts of servitude turn these women into particular kinds of languagized domestic workers that are also stratified by country of origin.

All varieties of English are intertwined with questions of access and discrimination along the lines of class, gender, and race. If the notion of concentric circles of English is to carry any weight, it needs, as Martin (2014) observes in the context of the Philippines, to encompass circles within circles. We have to distinguish between an inner circle “of educated, elite Filipinos who have embraced the English language,” an outer circle who may be aware of Philippine English as a variety but are “either powerless to support it and/or ambivalent about its promotion” and an expanding circle for whom the language is “largely inaccessible” (p. 53). The issue, therefore, is not centrally about how Philippine English differs from American English but how English resources are spread, used, and become available or inaccessible to people of different classes and ethnicities across these islands, how English operates amid questions of access, education, style, disparity, and difference. The focus needs to be not so much on linguistic variation as on “linguistic discrimination and prejudice experienced by translingual speakers” (Dovchin, 2019, p. 85).

Laying claim to a variety of English (such as Philippine English) is a claim on multiple levels – to authentic, equal, cheap, elite, or local ways of speaking – but what such claims usually cannot do is make a case for native speakerhood. As the World Englishes and ELF frameworks make clear, this is a domain reserved for predominantly White speakers of particular varieties (Guilherme, 2019): “Many studies which engage with identities in English lingua franca communication remain locked in a type of ‘happy English’ paradigm and issues of discrimination have not received much attention” (Rudwick, 2022, p. 4). The equation of the native speaker with whiteness and the non-native speaker with non-whiteness (Kubota and Lin, 2009) leads to “both race and nativeness” being “elements of ‘the idealized native speaker’” (Romney 2010, p. 19). People of color face discrimination as non-native speakers, and non-native speakers are stigmatized within a racial order (Rosa and Flores, 2017). “White normativity,” Jenks (2017) points out, is deeply embedded in the practices and ideologies of English language teaching, part of a “system of racial discrimination that is founded on White privilege, saviorism and neoliberalism” (p. 149).

Such language stratifications – whether gendered registers of servitude, class-based disparities between elites and ordinary people, or “ideologies about race, language, and the elite” that “are central to questions of coloniality,” Reyes (2017, p. 211) – are part of the deep entanglements of English and “symptomatic of the harsh and polarized social stratification in the Philippines” (Tinio, 2013, p. 209) as well as more broadly. For Block (2018), English “becomes the mediator of increasing inequality in job markets and societies at large, as we see the emergence of what is, in effect, an English divide” (p. 12). This rift between English education (often private) and local (“vernacular”) education can be deeply

divisive, with English education in India, for example, connected on the one hand with the denigration of vernacular languages, cultures, and ways of learning and teaching, and, on the other, dovetailing “with the values and aspirations of the elite Indian middle class” (Ramanathan, 2005, p. 112). A similar divide can also be seen, however, between the private English assets that the Indian middle classes can access and the private but low-quality English resources available to the aspirational poor (Mathew, 2022). This sign for the “Achieve Goal English as a Second Language” school in the backstreets of Cebu is thus entangled on multiple levels and in multiple ways with intersections of class, race, and gender in both local and wider stratifications of social relations.

Enbanglements of English

This sign and its emplacement is an assemblage of cheap English, sexual desire, neoliberal goals, domestic workers, multilingual repertoires, Korean English frenzy, American colonialism, brownouts, call centers, racial hierarchies, unequal resources, and tangled wires (Pennycook, 2020). We cannot understand English in Bangladesh without similar detailed understanding of both the physical emplacement of signs and utterances and the ways in which it is enmeshed within local economies, and all the inclusions, exclusions, stratifications, and inequalities this may entail. We cannot therefore sensibly discuss English or English language teaching in Bangladesh without considering how all that is done in policy, practice, curriculum design, and assessment is connected to broader political and ideological questions, including the relationship with the multilingual ecologies of mother tongues, indigenous ethnic languages, and the national languages with their specific historical, political, and sociocultural significances (Sultana, 2021b), or with the distinctions that are often made between rural and urban speakers (Sultana, 2021a).

When a young man of Chakma background suggests “We don’t need Bangla,” it is important to understand this deliberate distancing from Bangla as indicating “a deepseated linguistic, historical, political, and cultural desire for an identity that does not exist in the present, but is historically rooted and *entangled* with the future” (Sultana and Bolander, 2021, p. 14; emphasis added). English is embedded in local economies of desire, or ways in which demand for English is part of a larger picture of change, modernization, access, and longing (Hamid, 2016). It is tied to the languages, cultures, styles, and aesthetics of popular culture and changing modes of communication, the ways in which “Bangladeshi youths discursively claim their legitimacy in reusing these local and global multimodal semiotic resources” (Sultana, 2019, p. 16). Online translanguaging practices, however, as (Sultana, in press) also shows, are by no means just a process of creativity or resistance to oppressive language ideologies, but can also function as the breeding ground for the production of new kinds of intolerance and bigotry.

English is entangled with religious education, madrasas, and the choice between *deen* (religious understanding) and *duniya* (material conditions) (Chowdhury, 2021). People in rural madrasas in Bangladesh, Chowdhury (2021) explains, “present a complex array of alternatives in terms of economic advancement, western development programmes, linguistic markets (Arabic and Bangla), linguistic hegemony, globalism, and importantly,

intellectual stances (reflexive critical traditionalism)” (p. 17). To understand the diversity of what English is and what it means in all these contexts, we need to avoid prior assumptions about globalization and its effects, and develop instead critical studies of the local embeddedness of English. English in Bangladesh is therefore both similar and different to the entanglements of English in the Philippines: both are part of the wider Asian region, yet have very different geopolitical and economic backgrounds; both have colonial histories, yet of a very different type (British versus Spanish and American); both are strongly religious, yet one is largely Catholic (apart from Mindanao), while the other is largely Muslim; both are multilingual, yet have very different linguistic policies and ideologies. There are many such broad similarities and differences, but it is the local contingencies of class, ethnicity, desire and discrimination with which English is entangled that really matter.

Conclusion: Disentangling English

The idea of entanglements of English draws our attention to the multiple levels and ways in which English is part of social and political relations, from the inequalities of North/South political economies to the ways it is connected to discourses and ideologies of change, modernization, access, and desire. “Any discussion of English as a global language and its socioeducational implications” Rubdy (2015) reminds us, “cannot ignore the fact that far from being a solution to the dismantling of ‘unequal power’ relations in the world, English is in fact often part of the problem” (p. 43). At the same time, a framework of entanglements and assemblages allows us to avoid levels or scales that place the global at the top and work their way down through nations to the local. A scalar approach implies levels of importance that do not match with people’s lives and contingencies (an English-only classroom language policy may be far more important than a national policy on language education). An assemblage approach avoids necessarily favoring one set of social and political relations over another whereby, for example, political economy is seen as more fundamental than, or as determining, classroom materiality. Such a move may appear to problematically equalize inequality – suggesting that all inequalities are the same in a flattened hierarchy – but this is neither the intention nor the outcome of this way of thinking.

By showing how English is entangled with social, cultural, political, and economic relations (Beck, 2018) I have tried not to favor one over the other, not to suggest that class matters a priori more than race or gender, economy more than health, materiality more than discourse. In these local assemblages, certain things do, of course, matter more than others – modes of inequality are not equal – but the point is not to operate with a predefined hierarchy of inequality. Inequalities must be understood in relation to each other. Although at times a focus on assemblages may appear to lead to flattened hierarchies and ontologies, it is, by contrast, intended as a way of understanding and engaging with contemporary political relations: “The logic of assemblage,” Hardt and Negri (2017) assert, “integrates material and immaterial machines, as well as nature and other non-human entities, into cooperative subjectivities. An enriched freedom of assembly generates subjective assemblages that can animate a new world of cooperative networks and social production” (p. 295).

This approach allows for an alternative in terms of the politics of assembly and a more intertwined set of policies, practices, and discourses that occur across multiple spatiotemporal domains. Drawing on insights from Southern Applied Linguistics (Pennycook and Makoni, 2020) and posthumanist theory (Pennycook, 2018), this paper has sought to give an account of how English can be understood in relation to these local and global entanglements. A focus on English entanglements sheds light on how being “part of the problem” is about the interconnectedness between language, place, power, objects, class, race, gender, and more. To create a new post-neoliberal society, and a new post-homo economicus subjectivity, therefore, we need to be able to imagine “new subjectivities that operate increasingly according to a *logic of assemblage*, defined no longer by their possessions but by their connections” (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p. 295; emphasis added). This is to see how English is entangled in everyday, simultaneous activities and material encounters, and how a project of radical redistribution may concern not only political economy but also assemblages of linguistic resources, identifications, artefacts, and places.

The challenge, then, is how to disentangle English. This is not to suggest that English can somehow become unentangled – a language separated once more from all that it is engaged with – but rather that the relations between English and discourses, ideologies, cultures, and economies are not inevitable. This is a decolonial project that takes up the challenge to delink English from its ties of coloniality (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), to challenge the connections between English and visions of modernity, to oppose ways English is assumed to be a pathway to change, development, and material success, to confront the relations between English and social, racial, and gendered discrimination, to counter the entanglements of English with forms of political economy and embodied desires, and to rethink our assumptions about languages and multilingualism (Ndhlovu and Makalela, 2021). This implies decolonial activism, research, and pedagogy that aim both to decolonize and provincialize English and to redress the repressive institutionalization of inequality in contemporary life with which it is connected (Pennycook, 2019). Looking through the lenses of entanglements and assemblages can show how these relations may be contingent, locally formed and unstable.

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