Conceptualizing and Problematizing Boundaries in Language Education

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Chapter 1
Conceptualizing and Problematizing Boundaries in Language Education
Achilleas Kostoulas

1.   Introduction

This is a book about borders in language education, or, more precisely, a book that aims to challenge the way we think about the boundaries that define our professional lives as language educators. The idea that language education is, inherently, an act of border crossing is not particularly novel. In a plenary address delivered at the 1996 Annual Conference of the Japanese Association for Language Teaching, Julian Edge pointed out that:

> border-crossing resonates at so many levels and in so many ways: the physical, the cultural, the political, the geographical, the psychological, the social, the personal – and that is without even beginning to consider what might be seen as the core, professional borders of language and pedagogic style which we cross daily in our necessarily cross-cultural TESOL activities. (Edge, 1997, p. 2)

In the years since, interdisciplinary outlooks have become increasingly popular in the field of language education, but there is still a very visible sense of compartmentalization, both in our informing theories and in the practice of language teaching. Crossing such boundaries is an ongoing task, and one to which this book aims to contribute. However, locating language in the faultlines that traverse the profession (e.g., between native and target language, between familiar and exotic cultures, between theoretical disciplines, or between craft and science), and demonstrating that our professional action involves mediating between such domains is just one of the ways in which boundaries need to be challenged.

What is perhaps more relevant to the purpose of this book is the observation that borderlines do not just segregate aspects of our professional lives, but also serve to bound them, by separating language education from other domains of activity, and defining what it includes (or, more pertinently, what it excludes). In language education, these borders have tended to confine our interest in the instrumental uses of language and the technical aspects of methodology. In this perspective, learning a language is about developing the ability to communicate; the ways in which language education may connect to values, justice, ethics, and power are left unexamined, on the other side of the conceptual border. Similarly, when

theoretical knowledge is brought to bear on language education, this is often in the interest of fostering teaching skills and, ultimately, promoting efficient learning. Those aspects of education that pertain to the creation of a "formative culture of beliefs, practices and social relations that enable individuals to wield power […] and nurture a democratic society" (Giroux, 2011, p. 4) are typically ostracized from the language classroom. The structures through which this technocratic vision of language education is legitimated, and alternatives excluded, are the second type of boundaries that this volume aspires to challenge.

The interrogation of these boundaries is timelier than ever, as in recent years we are witnessing an erosion in the certainties through which language education has traditionally defined itself. For instance, the emergence of hybrid pedagogical forms, like Content and Language Integrated Teaching or English Medium Instruction, have meant that distinctions between language education and other aspects of teaching and learning are becoming less clear-cut. At the same time, relatively straightforward divisions of labor, whereby language teachers just applied the findings of educational and linguistic research, are being replaced with hybrid identities which fuse the roles of teachers and researchers, invested with authority and responsibility. Added to this, we have to contend with the fact that "texts, languages and semiotic resources are crossing boundaries easily … [and] … territorialised (i.e., spatially routed and circumscribed) ways of conducting social ties, identities and community lives are receiving less significance" (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 2). Across the entire field of language education, there is a questioning of social, cultural, theoretical and disciplinary structures, and this raises questions about the boundaries within which our professional existence is organized.

The impetus for putting together an edited volume that attempts to address these themes was provided by the *Language Education Across Borders* international conference, an interdisciplinary meeting that took place in Graz in December 2017. Much like the Graz conference, this volume is premised on the belief that there is need for more shared discourse that challenges persisting borders: discourse that might bring closer those of us whose interests lie in different languages and curricular areas; discourse that will enable synergies between diverse theoretical perspectives; and discourse that might help to bridge divides between theory and practice.

2.   Language Education at a Time of Post-Certainty

This is a book written for an age of crisis in language education, one which necessitates re-engaging with fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of our professional activity. Giroux (2011, p. 14) reminds us that every form of education "presupposes a vision of the future and a legitimation of particular forms of social life", but (as will be seen in the paragraphs that follow) it appears that many established or axiomatic beliefs about language, teaching and learning can no longer fulfil their authority-providing function. As our certainties about the foundational beliefs of language education are eroded, we are also becoming increasingly attuned to what MacNamara (2012, p. 478) described as the "presence of the irrational" in the spaces where language is created, taught, learnt, and used. It is in these senses that we might describe this crisis as a *post-certainty* age, and this observation has profound implications for the ways we think about the theory of language education, our preferred ways of teaching and learning, and the ways we relate to the context of our professional activity.

With regard to the conceptual premises of language education, the field appears to have entered a *post-theoretical* phase. This post-theoretical turn does not involve only the rejection of the so-called grand theories, but also a questioning of the role of theory itself, and the ways in which it is created, institutionalized, and applied in language education. One aspect of this post-theoretical turn is the rejection of positivist thinking in language education, the belief that language and the learning and teaching processes can be better understood by segmenting them into conceptually manageable problems which can then be resolved by the application of reason and the scientific method (Kostoulas, 2018). Increasingly, this belief is complemented by accounts that foreground the complex interconnections between the phenomena that interest us as language educators, and the ways in which they function within social ecologies (Kramsch, 2008; van Lier, 2006; Tudor, 2001). A second aspect is the poststructuralist redefinition of language: This represents a shift away from the Saussurean perspective of language as a stable system brought to existence by the aggregation of its structural elements, which transparently represents realities external to the user. In place of such conceptualizations, language education is increasingly beginning to engage with contemporary debates in linguistics and psychology that raise awareness of how discourse is

created, and the ways in which it serves as a site for the construction of identities (e.g., De Costa, 2016; Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 2017).

A similar shift appears to be taking place in language teaching methodology, which seems to have entered a *post-universal* phase. This is defined by a realization that whatever the commonalities that unite us a profession, language teaching and learning is lived out locally. One way in which this post-universalism is experienced is in the increased willingness to accept cultural relativity, and the decoupling of the global language from a global culture. Whereas language teaching has been, justly, criticized for promoting monolithic versions of a, typically Western, target culture (e.g., Kumaravadivelu, 2006a; Phillipson, 1992), recent work has highlighted the ways in which language education can lead to the development of hybrid identities and cultural "third spaces" (Kramsch, 1995). A second way in which language education is moving away from universalist beliefs is the emergence of the "post-method condition", the legitimation of pedagogical methods which are in tune with local educational values and practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2006b). This is premised on the disillusionment with the "elegance of clear, rationally formulated curricula or the confident claims of current 'best practice'" (Tudor, 2001 p. 1), and it replaces the search for universally effective teaching methods with the belief that pedagogy should be responsive to local contingency (Holliday, 2013).

The third way in which developments in language education are challenging certainties about the teaching and learning of languages involves the ongoing global political restructuring, and the onset of what might be termed a *post-sovereign* era. From a political perspective, language education has tended to exist within two frameworks that are now obsolescent: colonialism and the nation-state. Writing in the early 1990s, Phillipson made a compelling case that, not only has the global teaching of English (and by extension other western languages) sustained a power disparity between the colonizing west (the "center") and the colonized "periphery", but also that this disparity that did not abate after the collapse of the 19th and early 20th century empires. However, this power geometry appears to be disrupted by the increased transnational flows of people and texts associated with globalization, the development of ethnically, linguistically, and culturally superdiverse urban spaces (Blommaert, 2013), and our growing understanding of the roles of *lingua francas* (e.g., Seidlhofer, 2011), translanguaging (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2017), and polylingualism

(Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen, & Møller, 2011). At the same time, the political structures of the nation-state are being destabilized. The ideology of the nation-state, which postulated the unity of language, ethnicity, and territory is no longer sustainable, not only because hitherto subjugated minorities are adopting nationalist discourses, but also because of migration and the development of transnational discourse communities. For language education, the implication is that it is no longer defensible to think of either language learners or target language speakers as homogeneous, essentialized groups. The challenge that this poses to language education is one of understanding how language-related identities are constructed, and how they interact with linguistic behavior, at both the individual and the collective levels.

To summarize, many of the assumptions that sustained language education as a field of professional activity can no longer be unproblematically articulated. The restructuring of the field includes a reappraisal of the role of theory (post-theoretical), a shift from universally relevant values and practices to professional practice that is more meaningfully grounded on the particularities of the local context (post-universal), and a reorganization of the social context in which language education is embedded (post-sovereign). A central premise running through this book is that this restructuring provides language teachers with an opportunity to redefine the profession in ways that provide more agency and more empowerment. To that end, several of the contributions that make up this collection describe aspects of this restructuring, and invite readers to reflect on how the emerging realities of the profession disrupt existing structures and boundaries in the profession. Complementing this, several other contributions discuss ways in which the language educators can re-envisage the profession, by re-building the boundaries of language education in ways that are closer to their values and needs.

3. The Contents of this Book

As stated above, the "boundaries" that this edited volume intends to challenge can be conceptualized in two ways. The first is to view them as faultlines that separate different aspects of the profession. This is the perspective that has been used as the organizing principle of the collection. Faultlines, in this sense, can be theoretical or disciplinary, when they involve different ways of thinking about language education. Some examples of theoretical and disciplinary boundaries and attempts to overcome them are represented in

Part A of the book, and they include differences between models of teacher education (see Skela, this volume), differences between linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives (see Kostoulas, this volume), differences between aspects of critical thinking (see Stelma & Fay, this volume), or differences between theoretical orientations (see Costantino, this volume). Another set of boundaries is curricular and organizational, and might index differences between teaching English and other content areas. The chapters in Part B discuss how such boundaries might be challenged by hybrid pedagogies, which fuse linguistic objectives with other curricular areas (Vourdanou, this volume), intercultural comprehension (Mewald, this volume), technical education (Tatzl, this volume), and literature and global education (Wehrmann, this volume). Boundaries, in the sense of separating lines within the profession, could also refer to geographical borders, as seen in Part C, which includes contributions on globalization (Moser & Kletzenbauer, this volume), study abroad mobility (Hessel, this volume), superdiverse schools (Schwarzl, Vetter, & Janík, this volume), and refugee education (Kitsiou et al., this volume). Similarly, it might refer to temporal borders, such as the boundaries between work and non-work time, or professional life and retirement (Babić & Talbot, this volume).

The second way in which boundaries in language education might be conceptualized is as structures that "bound" and define the profession. This conceptualization runs across the book, whether these boundaries are explicitly challenged, or implicitly problematized. In this case, the act of "challenging boundaries" is not one of forging connections, but rather one of articulating an understanding how such structures come into being, and interrogating their value. It involves understanding how such boundaries connect to the exercise of power, especially at the levels of intention and decision (see, especially, Stelma & Fay, this volume). It entails conceptualizing and articulating theoretical understandings (see Costantino, this volume; Kostoulas, this volume), with a view to exposing the latent nature of ideology in language education, and tracing connections to hegemony. Finally, it involves reimagining the role of the language education professional in ways that extend beyond facilitating the development of linguistic competence, and encompass what has been variously termed "responsible pedagogy" (Rivers, 2015), "global citizenship" (Birch, 2009), and "global education" (Lütge, 2015).

Structurally, this collection is divided into three parts, which correspond to different ways of conceptualizing boundaries. The first part, entitled "Rethinking language education theory" comprises four chapters that invite readers to reflect on the corpus of theoretical knowledge that informs language education, and the ways in which such knowledge is produced and can be used.

This discussion begins with a contribution by Janez Skela (Chapter 2), who sets the scene by inviting readers to a guided tour of the field of language education. In this chapter, Skela uses the metaphor of a landscape to describe teaching methodology, the role of research and academic ideas, and second language teacher education. In his description, Skela highlights the interconnections between the three domains. He also traces salient developments that are moving the field away from the "golden age" of certainty, such as the emergence of the post-method condition, the rise and fall of applied linguistics as a source of theoretical knowledge for language education, and the move from relatively simplistic models of teacher training to reflective teacher education. This discussion leads him to problematize the effectiveness of current modes of teacher education, especially in view of the heightened demands associated with post-method teaching.

Taking a cue from this problematization, in Chapter 3 Achilleas Kostoulas puts forward a theoretical framework for language education, which can serve to scaffold the theory-building and professional development of language teachers. In the first part of the chapter, Kostoulas describes the components of the framework, which connects language education theory to three informing disciplines (applied linguistics, language education psychology, and pedagogical theory). He also emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary synthesis of the insights that each informing discipline provides, in order to produce coherent theoretical accounts at appropriate levels of abstraction. In the second part of the chapter, it is suggested that the theorizations produced can be either conservative or transformation-oriented, and uses examples of novel theoretical insights which can "perturb" the theory in either direction.

The next chapter (Chapter 4), by Juup Stelma and Richard Fay, further extends this discussion by examining the connections between critical understandings of the context and purposeful action. The chapter begins with an overview of various approaches to critical thinking that have been used in applied linguistics, which – as they compellingly argue – do not always theoretically account for the stratified dynamics of human ecologies. To address

this need, they propose an ecological perspective which synthesizes questions of power and agency, mutuality, affordances and situations, as well as connectedness, which they approach through the lens of intentionality and intentional dynamics. To exemplify their perspective, the authors describe the language policies used in Nordic universities as a "critical-intentional" response to the competing needs of preserving linguistic ecologies and accommodating to the spread of English as a global academic lingua franca.

The first part of the collection concludes with a chapter by Anna Costantino (Chapter 5), who demonstrates how a language educator developed an enhanced, theoretically informed understanding of her professional practice and context. In her chapter, Costantino describes how she made use of Exploratory Practice in order to understand her classroom experiences as a language teacher, a practitioner researcher, and an education theorist. Drawing on insights from her engagement with Exploratory Practice, as well as theoretical constructs such as praxis, classroom resources and multiscalar practices, Costantino articulates an understanding that challenges the technocratic models of language education that permeated her context. In doing so, she also demonstrates the processes of theorization that were described in previous chapters.

Part B comprises four chapters that problematize the disconnects between language education and other aspects of the curriculum, or between linguistic objectives and other aims of education. This part begins with Chapter 6, by Katerina Vourdanou, which focusses on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Vourdanou explains that institutional restrictions have meant that CLIL is only informally practiced in Greek schools, and that existing teacher education programs have failed to prepare language teachers to design and implement effective CLIL instruction. She goes on to argue for a model of teacher education which aims to develop hybrid (language and content specialist) teacher identities as well as communities of practice focusing on CLIL. This provides the theoretical warrant for an online teacher education program, which she goes on to describe. This description is accompanied by empirical data from the needs analysis that preceded the program, which help to contextualize the decisions associated with its design. The description of the program, along with its theoretical and contextual justification, trace the boundaries between curricular areas and also point towards ways in which these can be challenged through teacher education.

Chapter 7, by Jürgen Wehrmann, also traces connections between curricular areas, namely language education and teaching aspects of culture through literature. In this chapter, Wehrmann proposes a model of language education that integrates linguistic, literary, cultural, and ecological learning. This model of Global Education, which he contrasts to intercultural and transcultural learning, necessitates moving away from semiotic understandings of culture, which Wehrmann replaces with Deleuzian conceptualization of culture as an "assemblage of assemblages", derived from the work of Manuel DeLanda. To illustrate how this model of education might be implemented in classroom practice, Wehrmann concludes his chapter with a description of a model lesson, based on Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972)*.*

The following chapter (Chapter 8), by Dietmar Tatzl, provides another example of pedagogy which challenges the divisions between curricular areas, this time in the context of Further Education. This chapter describes a practitioner case study, in which the author evaluated an English for Specific Purposes module in an aviation engineering program. Tatzl notes that the academic traditions of language teaching and engineering are very dissimilar, which poses challenges to their effective integration, and goes on to describe how the participants in the module engaged in authentic language tasks while constructing a model aircraft. He then presents extensive statistical data which pertain to the evaluation of the module, on the basis of which he concludes that the use of authentic tasks was pedagogically successful.

In the final chapter of Part B (Chapter 9), Claudia Mewald tackles the challenges of teaching language to large, multilingual classes, and describes how intercomprehension can be pedagogically exploited in such contexts. Intercomprehension is defined as the use of pre-existing knowledge, skills and strategies as well as schematic and contextual knowledge and visual support, in order to comprehend unfamiliar languages. The chapter includes a detailed presentation of a framework for intercomprehension methodology, which consists of six elements: authenticity, autonomy, scaffolding, strategies, awareness, and sensitivity. After presenting the framework, Mewald demonstrates its use through multimodal texts that were produced by young learners, with diverse linguistic backgrounds and discusses the pedagogic benefits of this approach.

The third part of the collection looks into the changing anthropogeography of language education, and includes five chapters that show how the disruption of geographical borders is transforming the populations of the profession. This discussion opens with Chapter 10, by Alia Moser and Petra Kletzenbauer, who look into the construct of teacher identity and the ways that it is challenged by globalization. Their discussion begins with a theoretical overview, in which the authors suggest that a discussion of the teacher identity should account for phenomenological validity, situatedness, dynamism, and potential for change. They then go on to present empirical data from a small-scale qualitative study that examined how globalization is influencing language teachers in Austria. Although grounded in a specific context, their study highlights the dynamic ways in which teacher identity develops and the influence of globalizing pressures, both of which have the potential to inform teacher psychology more broadly.

The next chapter (Chapter 11), by Sonja Babić and Kyle Talbot also looks into teacher psychology, by examining an under-researched population, namely language educators who have recently retired, but are still professionally active. In the chapter, the authors examine the experiences of three language educators who had worked in Higher Education. Using border theory as an analytical frame, Babić and Talbot show how their participants navigated the challenges of retirement, and the redefinition of their role, as well as the boundaries between professional and personal life. These findings are extremely topical, given the prevailing neoliberal policies which are making such boundaries increasingly permeable.

In Chapter 12, Gianna Hessel shifts our attention to language learners and the topic of transnational mobility. The chapter reports on findings from a longitudinal quantitative study of German students who participated in the ERASMUS mobility schemes of the European Union. By looking into the students' linguistic proficiency and self-efficacy levels at the start of the program and after three months abroad, Hessel shows that the students' intercultural interactions with students in the host country were significantly associated with their self-conceptions, even for students with high linguistic proficiency.

Chapter 13, by Lena Schwarzl, Eva Vetter, and Miroslav Janík, reports on a collaborative project that studied multilingual schools in Austria and the Czech Republic. In the first part of the chapter, the authors describe the schools in terms of their language policies practiced, using the construct of discursively and socially constructed linguistic space as an analytical

frame. In the next section, readers are presented with information from interviews with the principals of the schools, who also talked about the language policies of the schools. This information is complemented, in the following section, with student-generated data on the students' linguistic repertoires. By synthesizing all the information above, the authors conceptualize schools as linguistic spaces which exist in a continuum between uniformity and pluralism, and they conclude that monolingual norms are still prevalent, even though borders are becoming more porous.

The collection concludes with Chapter 14, a description of an online MA program offered by the Hellenic Open University, by Roula Kitsiou and colleagues. The "Language Education for Refugees and Migrants" program, which was initiated in 2016, aims to develop the professional skills of language teachers and other professionals involved in working with refugee and migrant populations. The three substantive sections of the chapter describe the context of the program, aspects of its design, and the participants' reaction to it. The program, which incorporated elements of critical pedagogy and extended the content of teacher education to include aspects of international law and Arabic, demonstrates how a digital humanities internationalized environment can offer spaces for negotiation, participation and action for the rights of underprivileged and invisible social actors.

4.   Before we move on…

There are two final points that need to be made before concluding this chapter. The first one is that this book has benefited from the effort of many people, to all of whom I am most grateful. I would like to thank the authors of their chapters for their enthusiastic support of this project, and for their extraordinary patience during multiple rounds of review. A special debt of gratitude extends to the colleagues who reviewed the chapters, and particularly Christina Gkonou, Eleni Motsiou, Judith Hanks, Vohla Arkhipenka, Richard Fay, and Juup Stelma. Needless to say, the responsibility for remaining editorial errors and oversights remains with me.

The second point is that the purpose of this collection is not to tear down boundaries for the sake of disruption, but rather to point out "on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thoughts the practices that we accept rest" (Foucault, 1981, p. 154). As such, it is a collection deliberately intended to challenge the reader's perceptions of what is normally accepted as language education, what is

methodologically feasible, and what is pedagogically effective. While I do agree with the authors' views regarding the implications of their work, I believe that all the ideas contained in these chapters are most valuable as long as they are *not* readily accepted, and as long as they trigger a renegotiation of the borders separating the sensible from the subversive. It is with this hope that I am now inviting you to move on to the authors' contributions.

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