Introduction: Linguistics and Cultural Studies

Language, as we have known since the eighteenth century at least, is at the heart of the study of culture. In most English departments in Germany (and continental Europe generally), linguistics, literature and Cultural Studies are institutionally established under one roof. In this environment, cultural and literary studies are considered natural bedfellows, and linguistics and literary studies also have a tradition of recently (re-)intensified cooperation in areas such as, for example, narratology and semantics (see Carter / Stockwell 2008 for a comprehensive and up-to-date survey). However, linguists and scholars in Cultural Studies usually pursue their research in mutual ignorance of each other's work. Why this particular axis of cooperation has remained so precarious is the question which this special issue of ZAA is going to address. Having explored the contact zones between linguistics and Cultural Studies in several jointly taught classes over the past few years, we are convinced that mere apathetic co-existence is not salutary and that both linguistics and Cultural Studies have much to gain from closer and more systematic cooperation in research and teaching. The five contributions assembled in this issue make this point — convincingly, though each in its own way. We hope that they will stimulate further co-operation in the field.

In almost 150 years of the history of linguistics and fifty-plus years of institutionally established Cultural Studies there has always been the potential for both a culturally aware linguistics and a linguistically aware cultural theory, but these promising beginnings were usually not developed systematically. In the routine of our day-to-day work as teachers and researchers in the broad field of English Studies, we tend to forget, for example, that modern linguistics and Cultural Studies share important founder figures. An obvious case in point is Ferdinand de Saussure, pioneer of linguistic structuralism and inspiration to students of culture in an array of 'cultural' disciplines ranging from anthropology via narratology all the way to film studies. Claude Lévi-Strauss has commented on his own highly fruitful appropriation of linguistic methodology in an apparently unrelated domain, the "grammar" of human kinship systems. Note that what Lévi-Strauss is concerned with is not the occasional and unsystematic dialogue across disciplinary boundaries but truly interdisciplinary research which generates long-lasting transformations in the fields thus brought together:

Des perspectives nouvelles s’ouvrent alors. Il ne s’agit plus seulement d’une collaboration occasionnelle, où le linguiste et le sociologue, travaillant chacun dans son coin, se lancent de temps en temps ce que chacun trouve qui peut intéresser l’autre. Dans l’étude des problèmes de parenté (et sans doute aussi dans l’étude d’autres problèmes), le sociologue
se voit dans une situation formellement semblable à celle du linguiste phonologue: comme les phonèmes, les termes de parenté sont des éléments de signification; comme eux, ils n’acquièrent cette signification qu’à la condition de s’intégrer en systèmes; les ‘systèmes de parenté’, comme les ‘systèmes phonologiques’, sont élaborés par l’esprit à l’étage de la pensée inconsciente; enfin la recurrence, en des régions éloignées du monde et dans des sociétés profondément différentes, de formes de parenté, règles de mariage, attitudes pareillement prescrites entre certains types de parents, etc., donne à croire que, dans un cas comme dans l’autre, les phénomènes observables résultent du jeu des lois générales, mais cachées. (Lévi-Strauss 1945, 36)

Just as the bewildering phonetic complexity of the sounds of human speech is reduced to the clear and universal principles of the underlying phonological systems, so the bewildering complexity of human social customs is made transparent by discovering the limited number of underlying abstract constellations, and a surprising and unexpected parallelism is established between the deployment of sound symbols, the smallest units in the “micro” mechanism of human languages, and kinship, a foundational institution at the “macro” level of human societies.

It is difficult to imagine such a fortuitous meeting of paths in the working conditions of present-day English departments, where linguists tend to lead relatively separate lives from their colleagues working in literature and Cultural Studies and have been moving closer to such disciplines as cognitive science (in the worst consequence leaving English Studies behind). De Saussure’s heritage is today parcelled out in rather disconnected ways. Introductions to linguistics still teach the phoneme in structural phonology but will rarely mention the profound impact this discovery has had in disciplines as diverse as anthropology or structural narratology. Instead, our routine introductions to linguistics emphasise another part of the Saussurean heritage, taking pains to assert the primacy of the abstract and de-contextualised linguistic system, *langue*, over socially and culturally embedded language use, *parole*. Cultural theorists, on the other hand, get a lot of mileage out of an – arguably one-sided – understanding of yet another aspect of the Saussurean heritage, the postulate of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign whose extreme manifestations are deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Founder figures of Cultural Studies with the potential to speak to linguistics include Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, for example, has been used to great effect by Ben Rampton in his studies of language use by adolescents in multi-ethnic London.

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1 English translation (Lévi-Strauss 1968, 352): “New perspectives then open up. We are no longer dealing with an occasional collaboration where the linguist and the anthropologist, each working by himself, occasionally communicate those findings which each thinks may interest the other. In the study of kinship problems (and, no doubt, the study of other problems as well), the anthropologist finds himself in a situation which formally resembles that of the structural linguist. Like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems. ‘Kinship systems,’ like ‘phonemic systems,’ are built by the mind on the level of unconscious thought. Finally, the recurrence of kinship patterns, marriage rules, similar prescribed attitudes between certain types of relatives, and so forth, in scattered regions of the globe and in fundamentally different societies, leads us to believe that, in the case of kinship as well as linguistics, the observable phenomena result from the action of laws which are general but implicit.”
Bourdieu’s notion of the linguistic market (1980, 133-6) is drawn on by Calvet (1999), to conceptualise, among other things, the power differential between English and the world’s other major languages, such as French, Spanish, Mandarin or Hindi. Such work is directly relevant to post-colonial studies, for example through the contribution it makes to understanding the complex realignments taking place right now among the traditional Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone linguo-cultural spheres in present-day Africa. Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* (1976) can still serve as a benchmark for a culturally aware historical-linguistic semantics today. To Williams we also owe such acute observations on the social embedding of linguistic standardisation as the following:

> These and similar changes [in eighteenth-century London pronunciation] were spread by improved communications, but the main agency, undoubtedly, in fixing them as class speech, was the new cult of uniformity in the public schools. It was a mixture of ‘correctness’, natural development, and affectation, but it became as it were embalmed. It was no longer one kind of English, or even a useful common dialect, but ‘correct English’, ‘good English’, ‘pure English’, ‘standard English’. In its name, thousands of people have been capable of the vulgar insolence of telling other Englishmen that they do not know how to speak their own language. And as education was extended, mainly under middle-class direction, this attitude spread from being simply a class distinction to a point where it was possible to identify the making of these sounds with being educated, and thousands of teachers and learners, from poor homes, became ashamed of the speech of their fathers. (Williams 1981, 247)

Michel Foucault, finally, whose work on discourse and power is largely ignored in linguistically oriented text and discourse analysis, has been a central inspiration to the school of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which was founded by Norman Fairclough at Lancaster and now commands a small but articulate international following (see, for example, Fairclough 1992 or Wodak 2001 and 2005). Contributions by many of the scholars mentioned in this brief survey, and others, have been collected in a reader (Burke, et al. 2000) which documents the vast potential for collaborative research uniting linguistics and Cultural Studies which remains to be realised.

What are the obstacles that have hindered such cooperation in the past? Disregarding politeness for a moment, the prejudices reigning on both sides are easy to state. Researchers in Cultural Studies consider linguists to be obsessed with empty formalisms and trivial details, whereas linguists suspect that Cultural Studies is given to uncontrolled and vapid theorising far away from any empirical basis. Getting beyond such mutually held prejudice is long over-due and will benefit both the individual researcher and teacher and the discipline of English Studies as a whole. Taking our own experience gained in several years’ collaborative teaching on the New Englishes and the New English Literatures as an example, we can identify the following areas as particularly rewarding for an approach integrating linguistics and Cultural Studies.

Creolisation and the “Black Atlantic”: After more than three decades of intensive research the creolisation of European colonial languages in the “Black Atlantic” cultural sphere is understood fairly well. It remains an intriguing question to investig-
gate to what extent this hybridisation of languages corresponds to similar processes in folklore, religion, music and – not least – in literature. A solid dose of sociolinguistic empiricism, we would argue, is indispensable for students to fully appreciate the stylistic versatility of contemporary Caribbean literature and popular music. On the other hand, a concept such as nation language, as developed by the Barbadian poet and cultural theorist Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Brathwaite 1984), deserves full consideration in a sociolinguistic description of language use and language attitudes in the contemporary Anglophone Caribbean – in spite of the fact that it does not map directly onto the discipline’s traditional terminology of (Standard) English, Creole and the mesolectal range of the continuum relating the two.

Language, power and identity in a post-colonial world: (Post-)colonial writing is infused with powerful language ideologies – sometimes explicitly formulated by the authors, sometimes voiced by characters in novels or plays and sometimes (the most interesting and theoretically most challenging case) implicit in the fabric of a polyphonic literary text. Again, cooperation across disciplines can be helpful in many ways. Strong language-ideological statements against the role of English are often expressed by post-colonial writers, the best-known example probably being the amply argued and deeply felt repudiation of African writing in English by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in his Decolonising the Mind (1986). Rather than being taken at face value, such statements deserve sympathetic sociolinguistic critique in the light of what is known about the complex inculturation processes the English language is inevitably undergoing in any community it was exported to in the colonial era (Schneider 2007), and such a critique will reveal them as what they are: examples of justifiable strategic essentialism in ideological debates, but not arguments against the creative potential of the New Englishes for literary writing.

In fact, Shakespeare’s Tempest, the play frequently adapted, alluded to and referenced in postcolonial literatures, contains a revealing passage on what could be seen as the cultural core of the post-colonial language question:

Caliban: This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first,
Thou strok’st me, and made much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o’ th’isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place, and fertile –
Cursèd be I that did so! […]

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2 “I believe that my writing in Gikuyu language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples. In schools and universities our Kenyan languages – that is the languages of the many nationalities which make up Kenya – were associated with negative qualities of backwardness, underdevelopment, humiliation and punishment. We who went through that school system were meant to graduate with a hatred of the people and the culture and the values of the language of our daily humiliation and punishment. I do not want to see Kenyan children growing up in that imperialist-imposed tradition of contempt for the tools of communication developed by their communities and their history. I want them to transcend colonial alienation” (Ngũgĩ 1986, 32).
You taught me language, and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!
(Shakespeare, The Tempest, I, ii, 332-64)

Caliban accuses Prospero not only of having taken his island away from him, but also of having “learned” him his language, for this language not only gives him a means to “name” – and thus know – the world, but also to “curse”; Caliban has lost his pre-colonial innocence in a positive as well as negative sense. From Gandhi to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, opponents of colonial rule were caught in an ideological double bind: using English in their anti-colonial struggle and nation-building activities in practice, while arguing for the renunciation of English as the only way out of the colonisation of the mind in theory. Today, however, the choice has turned out to be less tough than it seemed. We find that the English language has sunk deeper roots in India or West Africa than it ever did during the period of direct colonial rule, but also that this has had little do with former British cultural domination.

Our old notions of Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson 1992) clearly fail us in accounting for this situation. As Krishna Dutta has pointed out, in reference to Lord Macaulay’s famous call for the formation of a class of English-speaking Indians to serve as interpreters between “us and the millions whom we govern”:

And with the embracing of satellite television, e-mail, chat rooms, and the internet in the 1990s, English is fast becoming the pan-Indian language that Macaulay called for nearly two centuries ago. Whether he would have been pleased with what [Indians] are writing in this, their own English, one can only speculate. (Dutta 2003, 214)

Of course, tracing the long shadow of Empire and exploring the rich diversification of the English language in a post-colonial and persistently multilingual and multicultural world is just one area of shared concern for linguistics and Cultural Studies.

Abstracting from our own immediate experience and moving from the margins closer to the centre, we see other areas presenting worthwhile challenges for cooperatively minded scholars in Cultural Studies and linguistics. In two major studies, Anna Wierzbicka (2006 and 2010) has recently argued that large swathes of English idiom, vocabulary and even grammar are the linguistic sediment of 250 years of British and American post-enlightenment cultural development, initially articulated consciously as part of a specifically “Anglo” rationalist-pluralist and utilitarian discourse, but now subconsciously taken over as “natural” by speakers of the language. This is an invitation to the dialogue between linguistics and Cultural Studies at several levels. Harking back to the post-colonial complex of problems, Wierzbicka’s contribution may make us wonder whether Gandhi and Ngũgĩ were not right after all (at least up to a point), or – to turn around the question in a productive way – whether building on the insights formulated by Wierzbicka on the cultural bias of Standard English, we should not extend the scope of research to develop cultural profiles of the New Englishes along similar lines. Looking at the issue in the most general terms, Wierzbicka could be said to use the toolkit of contemporary cognitive semantics to return to the fundamental questions about
the relationship between language, thought and culture which were asked by Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then – in a slightly different way – taken up by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in the twentieth.

At the risk of being suspected of sloganeering, we would like to summarise our plea by saying that closer cooperation between linguistics and Cultural Studies is the best way to address one of the most pressing research priorities in English Studies today: the study of the role of the English language in cultural globalisation. Awareness of the ever-changing roles of the global language in its many multilingual settings – on the ground, in local and global mediascapes (Appadurai 1990 and 1996), and in literature and the arts – will help advance research in linguistics, literature and Cultural Studies alike. The “sociolinguistics of globalisation” has only recently emerged as an identifiable sub-field, with its first text-books and readers (Blommaert 2005, 2010, Coupland 2010). Where in classical sociolinguistics the mimetic fallacy reigned – because non-standard and vernacular varieties of English as represented in literature and the media were “invented”, “artificial” or “stereotyped”, they were discarded as legitimate data for analysis – the new research acknowledges the role of the media and of conscious performance in the spread of vernacular features and thus makes room for important concerns of Cultural Studies. In Cultural Studies, on the other hand, cultural contact is increasingly being seen in terms of transnational discursive flows (Pennycook 1994 and 2007), which represents a friendly invitation for linguists to contribute in the research. As rigid boundaries between disciplines are withering away, sociolinguists will come to realise that rap music, reggae, dancehall and even World Literature written in English have the power to shape language attitudes in the real world. Students of culture (including literature), on the other hand, will become sensitive to the ways in which individual linguistic creativity is sociolinguistically embedded. For the further development of English Studies, this can only be a good thing. In terms of academic institutionalisation, this means that linguistics, literature and Cultural Studies should not part ways but remain linked within a shared discipline and shared departments, in order to strengthen cooperation in research, but probably even more so in teaching.

Works Cited


