A Competence for Negotiating Diversity at Global Contact Zones

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Abstract:

Mary Louise Pratt (1987) initiated an important line of inquiry when she called for a shift from “a linguistics of community” to a “linguistics of contact.” We are finding this reorientation gaining urgency as we grapple with communication in conditions of late modern globalization, featuring migration, diaspora relationships, superdiverse urban settlements, digital media scapes, and transnational economic and production relationships. We realize now that Pratt’s (1991) notion of the “contact zone” is not a secondary space between the more primary “community.” All communities are contact zones that involve interactions between diverse languages and cultures. From this perspective, attempts to territorialize and circumscribe communities and languages in dominant theories of competence appear misleading. As we break away from the notion of bounded communities and attend to communication in the liminal spaces of contact, we face new questions confronting language competence. In this presentation, I consider how we can retheorize competence for contact zone negotiations. I base my reflections on the narratives and opinions of about 160 migrant professionals in English-dominant countries (i.e., USA, UK, Australia, and South Africa) interviewed in ongoing migration research.

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