

Political Geography and Language: A reappraisal for a diverse discipline

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Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. (Orwell, 2013 [1946])

Introduction:

In a time of inflammatory tweets, headlines of a “New Cold War”, and increasingly emotive rhetoric heard across the political spectrum, the power of language is not controversial. Yet, as Orwell exemplifies, neither is this insight considered particularly novel. In a time when deconstructive efforts are needed in order to poke holes in inflated political word-wizardry, current academic publishing pressures discourage that which is not continually breaking new ground or articulated as “world leading”¹. The field of Political Geography, and the related sub-field of Critical Geopolitics, are thriving with such innovative and creative engagements with the political world. This is certainly both welcome and important. However, in eagerness to embrace the newest mode of enquiry and most recent current of thought, there is arguably a risk of devaluing what is no longer at the so-called “frontier” – including the political importance of language, both as analytical focus and academic practice.

¹ Pressures felt particularly by early-career researchers, but no doubt familiar to many of this journal’s readers.

In the UK context it may be summarised as “REF-ability”.

It is within this disciplinary context that I want to make the case for the position of language in Political Geography: a reappraisal of language's power to produce worlds and worldviews, and specifically for scholars of Political Geography to redirect some attention to the (geo)politics of language. Employing a terminology of "language" and "language-practices" here is itself a deliberate act towards broadening the disciplinary debate beyond geopolitical "scripts", "texts", or "discourses" to highlight the potentially diverse shape such scholarly engagement might take in the twenty-first century. Both linguistic and literary approaches to language have in various ways influenced Geography in the past (see e.g. Barnes & Gregory, 1997; Crang, 1992), including forming an important part of the development of both the influential New Cultural Geography (Cresswell, 2010) and the interdisciplinary Critical Geopolitics in the late twentieth century (e.g. Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). However, it might be precisely because the power of language is considered a generally accepted conceptual point (and e.g. discourse analysis an established methodological approach) that there is arguably a risk of moving "beyond" it altogether. In the ever-evolving political geographies of the world, I argue that scholarly attention to language and language-practices should not be considered outmoded – as it unfortunately often seems to be – but instead may add another valuable angle from which to assess the present.

The intention here is not to critique new and innovative work, but rather to reappraise the value of language and linguistic analyses in Political Geography *as well*: not as an alternative but as an addition to a multifaceted discipline, engaging with a multifaceted world. What compelled this paper was the current media usage of the term "New Cold War": a classical example of how language may evoke, condition, and circumscribe certain responses. Indeed, it was the end of the "old" Cold War that is often credited with rise of Critical Geopolitics. Hence, it provides an appropriate empirical opportunity to revisit past insights in the political geographies of the present.

The article's focus is twofold, considering language and language-practices both as analytical focus and as academic practice in Political Geography. In what follows I first briefly explore the analytical role of language in earlier Political Geographical work, focusing specifically on the related sub-field Critical Geopolitics, and how scholarship has evolved in response. This is not meant to be an exhaustive review but to provide a brief contextualisation of the paper's argument. Second, I exemplify why there is a need for a reappraisal of language and linguistic analyses in Political Geography today with language of both the so-called "New Cold War" and of cybersecurity and - threat. Third, I move from language as research focus to medium, noting briefly what it might mean to critically diversify language-practices within the discipline – efforts that are themselves of political importance. Here, there is scope only to touch upon these issues, and so the discussion leads instead to an outline of what I suggest is an important and diverse research agenda to get to grips with these broad topics in future Political Geographical work. Finally in closing, I return to the paper's opening concern of novelty and intellectual impact in the academy, arguing that by allowing both most-recent and less-so scholarship to speak to each other – allowing conceptual conversations to disrupt traditional publication temporalities – scholars will be better positioned to build a fuller understanding of our contemporary situation.

World-making discourses: language in Political Geography

Language and language-practices do more than describe any external reality; they are an inherent part of *making* it. These are insights that have concerned numerous philosophers, as well as Geographers, through many years: For example, Wittgenstein's (2009) later work on philosophy of language centred on meaning's production within social context and practice; and vice versa, social context and practice's production within language. Derrida (1976) contributed "deconstruction" and de Saussure "semiotics" to mainstream social scientific parlance and modes of enquiry (see Lagopoulos, 1993). And in the work of Bakhtin, we find ways in which to engage e.g. the multivocal, "polyphonic", and "carnavalesque" of communication (see e.g. Holloway & Kneale, 2009; Painter,

2006). The ways in which current political relations are “made sense of” happen through that interpersonal interaction – language is arguably always already social and shared, a practice and a process.

Here it may be relevant to reiterate that “language” is used in a deliberately broad sense throughout the paper. It may encompass all of the above – scripts, texts, discourses – as well as body language and, another term already employed, language-practices. It is not my aim to disentangle terminological distinctions, as inevitably any individual study or article on each would need to do, but on the contrary to paint in broad brush strokes the contours of a research agenda. As will be elaborated below, the point is precisely that language is *more* than a collection of words and sentences, and *more* than a mere tool of communication. If Wittgenstein’s insights are to be taken seriously, language structures realities, reaching into what is often considered the domains of both epistemology and ontology.

Without rehearsing narratives about the evolution of Political Geography (nor specifically Critical Geopolitics), it is worth noting the influence of the so-called cultural turn both within and beyond the discipline in the late twentieth century (Aitken & Valentine, 2006, p. 339; Gregory & Castree, 2012). Lessons from literary theory have had profound effects on how the social sciences writ large are studied today, with *inter alia* Edward Said’s (1979) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) work now included in most undergraduate Geography curricula. Understandings about language and “the text” also informed how Geographers “read” and “wrote” the landscape (Barnes & Duncan, 2011; see also Mark, Turk, Burenhult, & Stea, 2011), and how they analysed the “scripts” of politics (Agnew, 2013; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Sharp, 1993); in short, what Gregory and Castree (2012, p. 33) refer to as a cross-fertilisation that “intensified the heterodox nature of human geography”.

Beyond academic “turns”, it was no coincidence that Critical Geopolitics came about in the wake of the Cold War: Often attributed to traditional political analyses’ failure to predict the USSR’s end, new thought and intellectual creativity became not only possible but necessary, diagnosing what had been overlooked in interrogations of power-balances and lines on maps. And so entered identities and discourses as key topics in International Relations and Political Geographical scholarship (see Campbell, 1992), and at their intersection, Critical Geopolitics. Associated with influential scholars such as Dalby (1990), Sharp (1993), Agnew (1994), and Ó Tuathail (1996) – to mention but a few – this was at its time cutting-edge: work that now stands as seminal, presumably well-known to *Area’s* readers. In short, scholars from across the above disciplinary boundaries recognised that hitherto overlooked or underestimated factors may have a stronger political influence than previously given credit for. For example, answers to geopolitical shifts were now sought in the realm of ideas, ideologies, emotions, identities, and discourses. And moreover, the linkages between formal, practical, and popular geopolitics were brought to light, demonstrating how political leaders draw on mass culture and vice versa (Ó Tuathail, 1986; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 1993). Nearly three decades later, arguing that discursive statements (Foucault, 1972) and citational practices (Butler, 2011) *matter* is not controversial – but neither does it seem to be considered very cutting-edge anymore. These concepts are not confined to language per se, of course; but they *are* about representations.

Few would argue that “everything is language” (Bialasiewicz et al., 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), and through the following decades there has been a proliferation of new ways to analyse and engage related concepts. In particular, it is worth highlighting increasing interest in the phenomenological, experiential, and embodied in this period – crucial aspects of “the political” spanning all scales. Feminist Geopolitics has drawn attention to previously overlooked aspects of the political world, demonstrating how a distinction between so-called “big P” and “small p” politics is not sustainable in practice (see Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2004; Massaro & Williams, 2013; Sharp, 2009). And,

with the publication of already seminal work on non-representational theories, such as Thrift's (2007) and Anderson and Harrison's (2010), as well as Lorimer's (2005) welcome terminological expansion to the more-than-representational, it is clear that there is far more to political realities than discourse and representation.

And indeed, work on the non-/more-than-representational was in many ways a response to a previous fixation with text and with language, recognising all that could *not* be located therein. This is also what Klaus Dodds (2001, p. 473) identified as potentially missing from Critical Geopolitics at the time: "It is striking that much critical geopolitical writing on foreign policy and national identity has been concerned (perhaps excessively) with representation rather than the mass of textual and bodily practices which enable such expressions of geopower" (see also Neumann, 2002). Also including recent work embracing e.g. the more-than-human, post-human, and new materialist, what these literatures have done is diversify and enrich the discipline (see however O'Loughlin, 2018 and responses; Secor, 2018; Toal, 2018). Most recently, in Political Geography as elsewhere in the academy, calls for decolonisation have started important and much-overdue conversations that go to the very core of scholarly endeavours, taking to task the power/knowledge-systems that both produce and are produced by academic work (e.g. Baldwin, 2017; Leeuw & Hunt, 2018; Naylor, Daigle, Zaragocin, Ramírez, & Gilmartin, 2018; see also Tuck & Yang, 2012). This too comes with its own set of implications for how we use language, and how language itself – either jargon or anglophone status – can singularise truth and understanding (see Müller, 2007); points I will return to below.

While the above paragraphs roughly outline recent decades of Political Geographical work, a recent event on the "new frontiers in Political Geography" (organised by Klinke and Dodds, 2018) invited a celebration of some of the exciting work currently taking place in the discipline. From computation (Dwyer, 2018) and robotic consciousness (Shaw, 2018) to evental processes of art and geopolitics

(Ingram, 2019), they all featured as powerful promises of rich literatures yet-to-come. In all of these, texts and language were present, yet not necessarily a primary analytical focus per se. Instead, language and language-practices tend to feature in the background – noted perhaps, but seldom explicitly foregrounded. Nevertheless, focus on what can be thought of as the more-than-human – be it art, algorithms, or (ro)bots – can also provide a means through which to explore the human; and with that, the question of when language and language-practices enter also arises: what kind of “language-games” might develop through the above topics at the “frontiers” of Political Geography?

However, it must also be added that other recent Geography conferences have heard comments implying that exploring “only” language is somehow considered impoverished, inadequate, and outmoded. It is of course true that political performances cannot be apprehended by looking only at transcripts or policy papers, but what is possible is to analyse what that text *itself* does (Dodds, 2001). And that is what is advocated here: an analytical and methodological diversity that allows asking what an articulation, a question, and a statement can do *as such*. Not as a poor reflection of an embodied mind, a communicative attempt, or ambiguous addition to action otherwise; but as a focus in itself, with power in and through socio-political relations. Again following Wittgenstein (2009), this entails seeing language and language-practices as something that is neither prior nor subsequent to but wholly embedded within social interactions (see Riley, 2005). And indeed, it entails seeing language itself as something embodied, communicative, and acted – deserving attention in its own right. In the below sections, I elaborate what this might look like in relation to present geopolitical concerns.

The so-called New Cold War

To bring the above conceptual points to a current empirical example, the present geopolitical relations between Russia and the “West” (however defined) has offered an admittedly unwelcome opportunity to reassess some of the lessons learnt at the end of the Cold War – and to (re-)consider

how language-practices, or indeed discourses, may condition political realities. To clarify, the term “discourses” is used here in a broadly Foucauldian-informed sense given its influence in Political Geography (but see Müller, 2008), but focusing specifically on the linguistic aspects thereof in this most recent geopolitical context.

That is, we are increasingly hearing about a “New Cold War”, echoing with old suspicions and secrecy (see Browning, 2018; Ciută & Klinke, 2010; Foxall, 2009; Monaghan, 2015; Ojala & Pantti, 2017). This is not an innocent simile or phrase; it is an example of words that powerfully conjure emotions, imaginaries, and indeed tangible actions. As Monaghan (2015, p. 14) argues: “Rather than illuminate [...], the polemics and analogies serve to choke discussion, with each denunciation coming louder than the last, all the while emptying real history from metaphor and debate”. In the UK, the narrative and rhetoric emerging from both the media and political leaders are characterised by the associative: linking current events to the past, painting vivid linguistic imageries. Media outlets such as *Foreign Policy*, *The Guardian*, *The BBC*, and *The New Statesman* have all contributed to the proliferation of “New Cold War”-claims during recent months. What is interesting here is not just whether this is “true” or not – if anything, recent months and years has made most of us question what that would be anyway. Rather, what is of interest in the context of this paper is what the naming does in and of itself. By calling it the new version of something supposedly already “known”, it translates the present moment into a version of the past – albeit a *new* version, perhaps marked by cybercriminal hackers rather than suspicious men in hats and sunglasses.

Speculations of a “New Cold War” have served many click-baiting journalists and writers well, also before the Crimea conflict (Ciută & Klinke, 2010; Foxall, 2009), undoubtedly in part due to the term’s emotive and even embodied power to potentially affect readers. That is, because of its potential mnemonic echo it is a term that makes many look twice at the headline, perhaps experiencing emotions such as concern or dread; or conversely, excitement or boredom with what may for some

be a well-rehearsed refrain, for others a geopolitical state-change. Not least those following Arctic politics would recognise the claim of a “New Cold War” (Wilson Rowe, 2013), exemplifying how language may frame e.g. changing environmental and material conditions as somehow connected to the geopolitical. In Arctic geopolitics, the significance is double of course – *any* kind of war would be cold in those parts. And in this manner, the word-usage goes beyond letters on a page to the haptic and embodied. As Klaus Dodds (2018, p. 21) explains in relation to ice, the ephemeral matter has been “literary and oral alchemy” for novelists, polar explorers, and shamanists alike; so too may their (linguistic) acts of naming or chronicling alter engagement, interpretation, and feelings of matter itself.

Language as embodied, practiced, and technological

Recognising the embodiment of language brings us back into conversation with other recent Political Geographical scholarship – and, moreover, to a recognition that bodies, well beyond the Cartesian “mind”, are intrinsic to use and understandings of language. As such, a return to language needs not mean a departure from the more-than-representational, affective, practiced, and so on (see Neumann, 2002; Riley, 2005). These are insights Paul Harrison (2002, p. 487) forwards in his “diagnosis” of “how the *modus operandi* of giving an explanation can, and often does, prevent us from acknowledging the practical and the performative, from witnessing the *taking-place* of meaning and understanding”; that is, asking how conventional social scientific articulations may preclude seeing that meaning, or language, too is an ever-ongoing practice. Yet surprisingly few Geographers have so far heeded the call for more engagement with the nebulous border-region (indeed, the frontier) in-between what may be referred to as the discursive and the pre- or non-discursive.

That being said, the recognition that a focus on language could happen in and through these seemingly non-linguistic scholarly literatures is not to imply a necessity of intellectual and/or methodological justification by means of forced links either. In attempts to produce work that will be

ranked as three- or four-star, satisfying narrowly defined metrics of scholarly “quality”, there will likely be many readers of this journal who have found themselves faced with the “marketability” of their research. This is perhaps the most radical part of my argument then, that it should be OK not to be academically “avant-garde” all the time. For example, a focus on present language and language-practices of and about e.g. Russia, Brexit, Trump, and so on, would be both welcome and important.

However fashionable or not, scholarship *does* need to contribute new knowledge in a continually changing world. While media’s portrayal of a “New Cold War” may seem like an obvious example of a recognisable narrative that reduces complex events to a digestible storyline of good and bad, it is not enough to thus merely repeat arguments made about the “old” one. In contrast, what makes this endeavour both pertinent and intellectually interesting is how the context has also changed – despite the recycling of narrative frames. Some of the most exciting new work in Political Geography centre on cyberspace and digital geographies, and these burgeoning literatures have much to contribute to our understanding here – also of language (see e.g. Thornton, 2017, 2018). For example, understanding how machine learning aids automatised bots in mimicking language-practices of activist groups in order to infiltrate and spread so-called fake news would be one worthwhile pursuit (Froio & Ganesh, 2018; Ganesh, 2018); how does the social use of specific linguistic patterns contribute to movements’ cohesion – or indeed to emotive and/or violent affects? Or considering the rise of the populist right across Europe, how does use of vernacular feed into senses of belonging and non/anti-elite empowerment? In this way, we are again seeing the contours of a holistic analysis, which includes *both* language and affect or collective feeling.

With both reinvigorated and innovative approaches to language and language-practices, the point here is that what some consider a fault line in the discipline need not be considered as such. There is much to gain by bringing these together, by considering e.g. how the embodied, affective, and technological are intrinsic to language – and, of course, vice versa. In short, these provide so far

underexplored research avenues within the discipline. Some of the questions that (re-)surface at present are: Why this use of particular words and terms (beyond hyperbole); how is the use received, accepted, spread, resisted, challenged; and with what effects? It is the latter question that highlights most powerfully that language-practices are about so much more than talk. It is, whether fortunately or not, quite often also about the walk; materialisation may begin in the realm of language. Action does not *always* follow words, but neither does it happen wholly independently of them. As the adage goes, “words make worlds” – and at the moment, the impetus should thus be on finding new ways of speaking, writing, and making better worlds.

In so doing, however, it is clear that these questions extend beyond methodological and theoretical considerations to the political also within the academy. It is beyond the scope here to review the full extent of efforts to critically diversify (and even decolonise) the discipline – and importantly, all those still needed – but in closing, it is worth noting how they extend to the topic of language and language-practices. First, there is a need to consider how linguistic reproduction of colonial terms and languages is part of the above “world-making” – including how Political Geographical terminologies themselves are part of reproducing power-structures and knowledge-hierarchies. And second, there is a need to further engage non-Western and non-anglophone scholarship (see Belina, 2005; Bialasiewicz, 2003; Fregonese, 2017; Kitchin, 2005). There are practical hurdles, such as those relating to access and translation², but none are unsurmountable with the shared efforts of editors, reviewers, assessment panels, and authors. Again, a reappraisal of language in Political Geography allows – or requires – a diversification of practices as well as research.

² Clearly, the majority of works cited here too are in English, if not necessarily by Anglophone authors, and largely from a Western academic context due to these questions of access, language-abilities, and indeed institutional discouragement of alternative modes of publishing.

Conclusion

What the above presents is, in the end, a call for more attention to and appreciation of language and language-practices, of *wordiness*. The aim of this brief paper has been to outline a diverse research agenda that could contribute to emerging issues in Political Geography. This does not mean replacing other approaches and innovative thought, however. Instead, it urges us to bring past insights into conversations with the present. Agnew and Ó Tuathail's (1992) seminal article on geopolitics and discourse is still assigned undergraduate students of Political Geography. We can build on it, expand it, and go "beyond" it, but there are also many more, new, and original insights to be found in the act of an utterance, a sentence on a page, or a sequence of code – with both material foundations and material effects.

In the above, I have briefly sketched how language has come in and out of focus in the discipline – foregrounded or backgrounded, but always part of scholarly endeavours. The current discourse of a "New Cold War" has prompted a re-reading of Critical Geopolitics' initial concerns – how politics are spatialised through representations, scripts, and narratives (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992) – but cannot be understood simply as a repetition of the past. On the contrary, it prompts the question of what is "new", and how we can understand today in light of both continuity and change. Language evoking Cold War associations is undeniably worth studying in its own right, but we may also extend our efforts to affective, embodied, and technological language-practices. The second, related example is emblematic of precisely that which is ostensibly "new", namely cybersecurity and -threat.

Considered by some as the "frontiers" of Political Geography today, these literatures allow us to consider for example how language may become automatised, encoded, or spread through so-far unconsidered capillaries. And finally, any discussion of language and language-practices in Political Geography today must also extend to academic practice itself; and here, an agenda to critically diversify the academy prompts us to not just critique and deconstruct but to effect change. If we

acknowledge the world-making power of language, the lens is turned also on our practices as authors and reviewers.

In the end then, a return to the opening point about practices of academic writing, seen from a particular moment and place: The current academic climate undeniably erects boundaries around what kind of scholarship that is deemed of value – calculated through governmental metrics that come to bear on institutional hierarchies (Smith, Ward, & House, 2011). Novelty and innovation, even “impact”, may discourage engagement with more dated work, on the one hand; and may discourage other means of academic language-practices, on the other. However, in bringing past and present scholarship into *conversation*, in neither unduly reversing nor skipping ahead, this needs not be so. The imperative is both ontological and political, as outlined above: it is through language that scholarly efforts come to be articulated in the currency of “stars”, and it is through language that they come to reproduce power/knowledge-structures too. In short, words are not passive representations but actively intervene in political worlds. If all of *these* words have done something, it is hopefully to serve as a mnemonic aide for some of the insights of Critical Geopolitics’ early days. Let it not take another Cold War to recognise and remember its merits.

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