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BOOK REVIEW



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Language Learning Environments: Spatial Perspectives on SLA by Phil Benson, Multilingual Matters, 2021 ISBN:9781788924894

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During my doctoral viva voce, my external examiner, Professor Phil Benson, asked if I could clarify my admittedly nebulous application of the term “learning environment,” and the ambiguously synonymous usage of others like “setting,” “context,” “atmosphere,” “learning space(s),” and “classroom.” To simplify this entanglement for the purpose of passing my oral examination, I asserted that I just meant “classroom.” However, in the months that followed, I reflected more deeply on this question. I first began to think about language itself as being a type of “environment” with its own inextricable qualities of space and structure, and with language use (spoken and written) giving breath to these dimensional attributes. As this metaphor seemed decidedly structuralist, I turned my attention to what I felt was a more interesting extrapolation of a spatial theme embedded in the concept of environments: the complex interactions in specific spaces and how such interactions relate to learning. It is on this first point (the spatial aspects of language) that Benson’s book begins and on the second (language learning environments) that it concludes.

To lay the theoretical foundations for a spatial theory in linguistics Benson begins with the social turn in SLA research that helped initiate the rather evident idea that language learning occurs in a place—an institutional, social, and cultural context—while also constituting a social process that co-constructs the context. The other essential contribution of the social turn is that it opened the doors to interdisciplinarity in linguistics, allowing for a far broader spectrum of ontological positions and theoretical frameworks to inform language learning research. From this new multidisciplinary repository, Benson applies *critical spatial theory* (originating in geography) to the examination of “language learning environments.” This theoretical perspective challenges the Newtonian objects-*in*-space notion of the world (basically, that empty space contains objects), and allows for what Benson calls an objects-*as*-space view that contends space is *composed of* and *produced by* the interaction of human and non-human entities (Benson, 2021). The distinction here is important as it undergirds the argument that second language acquisition is the consequence of

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the inextricable reciprocity of human and non-human objects that co-create the spaces they inhabit

The explanation for this reconfiguration of space as emanating from the complex interplay of the social and physical that begins Chapter 2 is a necessary one, however, it is towed intensely through its philosophical currents and at times leaves the reader wondering how this is about learning environments. The theoretical overview goes from Lefebvre's (1991) assertion that physical space has no reality without the energy within it to Harvey's (1978) use of relational space to Gibson's (1975, 1979) psychological theory of visual perception and environmental affordances to Marxist geography perspectives to Casey's (1998) argument for the concreteness of place to Massey's (2005) contention that it is interaction that defines social space to the actor network theory of Latour (2005) that attends to inanimate elements of social production to De Certeau's (1984) *proper place* as a mode of power and resistance to power to Low's (2016) social production of space (among others). Again, while this chapter may be heavy and slow rolling for some readers, understanding how these authors envisage *the production of space* is indispensable for understanding the spatial approach laid out in the rest of this book.

Accordingly, in Chapter 3, Benson turns the reader's attention to 'the spatiality of language and linguistics' (p. 37) by which he means, 1) the distribution and circulation of language in geographical space, and 2) how language "fits into space" (p. 38). Here, the point is made that linguistics does not explicitly possess a spatial theory but relies on metaphors that are present in models of the language system and language professions, prompting a discussion of the forces that forged the disciplinary space of *linguistics*. Benson specifies three distinct phases for the emergence of linguistics as an academic area of study: 17th-18th Century-grammar, 19th century comparative philology, and 20th Century linguistics, and their corresponding representational text, Milton's *The Port-Royal Grammar*, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, and *Syntactic Structures* by Chomsky, respectively. While even a summary of these contributions to a spatial perspective in SLA is beyond the scope of this review, it is enough to say that these texts succeeded primarily in amplifying the disciplinary space of linguistics. Not to be overlooked is the vital point that comes at the end of this chapter regarding the impact of dictionaries and grammar books on codifying and standardizing language norms in society. The most notable disciplinary influence of dictionaries and grammar treatise is that they attempt to artificially prescribe norms and to fix language into categories and classes, embedding with it inclusions, exclusions, and markings, all of which, eventually tie language to a specific place, most notably, the nation-state, an argument that is further fleshed out in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 aims to explicate Benson's contention that language should be viewed not as a fixed set of rules and arbitrary standards that frees language from its spatial constraint (i.e., the *where* of language and language learning) but instead as objects-*as*-space that perceives space as a property of objects. Benson puts forth three essential concepts: flat ontology; language-bearing assemblages, and mobilities. A flat ontology essentially asserts that all entities, human and non-human, exist and are thereby considered equal. Benson uses Harmen's (2016, 2018) position of object-oriented ontology, which states that "anything is real insofar as it acts" (Harmen, 2016). The fundamental assertion is that there is only one space, composed of the mental, physical, and social; and there are no hierarchies among these constituent part: they all exist and all act as language-bearing assemblages. Benson then uses DeLanda's (2016) idea that assemblages are emergent wholes that interact as inseparable components, yet also retain their autonomy. The important point to be made about language-bearing assemblages is that they carry language into the world and thus give language its spatiality. The last concept, mobilities, is particularly germane to the spatial conception of second language learning. Benson makes the astute observation that the term "target language" infers distance between the learner and their language goals (or perhaps even native-speaker proficiency) and implies that it is the learner that must move towards "the target." Referencing the work of Urry (2007), Benson makes the point that language

learning is not dependent only on the learner moving towards the language but contingent on numerous social and physical factors within the environment, and that in this way language-bearing assemblages are dynamic. Returning to the point made at the end of Chapter 3, these mobility systems are also central to language policy and standards within nations and to globalization because it is the mobility of language-bearing people, objects, and ideas that explain the mobility of languages and second language learning.

From this point, Benson turns to the concept of language learning environments in Chapter 5. Two perspectives constitute this framework: the 'areal' (i.e., the geographical space) and the 'individual' (the interaction of the learner with their environment). This chapter is at times confusing from a theoretical standpoint because the spatial framework is tied to aspects of an ecological perspective, yet frequent distinctions are drawn. While the discrepancies are generally well articulated, it does, at times, leave the reader wondering whether they are built upon the same theoretical foundations or theoretically at odds (or both). The chapter continues by delving directly into what made me pick up this book in the first place: the language learning settings, resources, and individuals that comprise learning environments. By its conclusion, Chapter 5 proposes a clear and practical framework for understanding and accounting for language-bearing assemblages in the process of language learning in formal learning environment and beyond. The final chapter, Chapter 6, offers suggestions for a spatial research agenda in applied linguistics.

Although many of the ideas would likely be challenging for the lay reader, novice teacher, or undergraduate student, Benson makes them accessible by explaining difficult ideas in different ways, using analogies, providing clear examples, and by being consistent with terminology. However, I think this book is especially well suited for graduate students and both early-career and experienced researchers. Indeed, I believe this book helped answer many of my questions about language learning environments and gave me the theoretical (and philosophical) foundation to put a spatial conception of SLA to use in my research. I see this framework particularly suitable for studies on language change and the preservation of endangered languages, for genealogy and migration studies, and for any study in which the language learning environment is central to the learning process (so, most studies). I would also suggest using it with methodological approaches in which the person and environment are essentially inseparable in the analysis, such as narrative inquiry (Benson, 2021), participatory action research, and visual methodologies. There is no doubt that this volume treads new ground and advances a coherent framework for researching and analysing the spatiality of language and language learning environments. My students can now thank (blame?) Professor Benson when I invite them to make clear how all objects, human and non-human, interact in the spaces they inhabit and to define their specific meaning of the "learning environment."

References

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