

REVIEW

# Postcolonial Pragmatics: Changing lenses

Dora Savoldi da ROCHA AZEVEDO 

University of São Paulo (USP)

## ABSTRACT

Seeking to account for the specificities of interactions in postcolonial societies contexts, Eric Anchimbe and Richard Janney (2010) developed the Postcolonial Pragmatics framework, which was the topic of Anchimbe's homonymous lecture in *Abralin ao vivo*. As a result of colonization and the consequent mixture between indigenous and colonizers ways of life, post-colonial settings are marked by hybridized forms of concepts, language, social norms, and speech (e.g. code-mixing and code-switching), thus leading to communication strategies which have been shaped by these heterogeneous environments. Postcolonial Pragmatics consists of a framework based on an emic perspective which aims at taking into account the hybrid settings found in postcolonial societies in pragmatic analysis. Anchimbe presents us with a new theoretical lens through which phenomena drawn from these hybrid settings are considered central to the Pragmatics' enterprise.



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Raquel Freitag

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Rafahel Parintins

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## RESUMO

Visando a abranger as especificidades das interações em contextos de sociedades pós-coloniais, Eric Anchimbe e Richard Janney (2010) desenvolveram o *framework* da Pragmática Pós-colonial, que foi o tópico da palestra homônica de Anchimbe no *Abralin ao vivo*. Como resultado da colonização e da consequente mistura entre os modos de vida de indígenas e colonizadores, os contextos pós-coloniais são marcados por formas híbridas de conceitos, língua, normas sociais e fala (e.g. code-mixing e code-switching), levando a estratégias comunicativas que foram modeladas a partir de ambientes heterogêneos. Pragmática Pós-colonial consiste em um *framework* baseado em uma perspectiva êmica que tem por objetivo incorporar os contextos híbridos de sociedades pós-coloniais à análise pragmática. Anchimbe apresenta novas lentes teóricas a partir de fenômenos

observados nesses contextos híbridos são considerados centrais para a pesquisa pragmática

## KEYWORDS

Postcolonial Pragmatics. Hybridism. Pragmatics.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Pragmática Pós-colonial. Híbridismo. Pragmática.

As part of *Abralin ao vivo – Linguists Online* series, Eric Anchimbe, professor at the University of Bayreuth, presented the outlines of the work developed by Richard Janney and himself on Postcolonial Pragmatics (ANCHIMBE; JANNEY, 2010). The lecture was mediated by Rafahel Parintins, professor at the State University of Minas Gerais (UEMG), and took place on July 30<sup>th</sup>.

In his talk, Anchimbe aims at introducing a specific Pragmatics framework, namely, the Postcolonial Pragmatics. According to the lecturer, mainstream theories in Pragmatics set as their departure point a monolingual and monocultural speaker, thus excluding the complexity of multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic postcolonial environments. Therefore, although Western Pragmatics theories have been used in linguistic analysis as if they appeal universally to all contexts, they fail to take into account important semiotic cues in socially and culturally heterogeneous settings, which may be essential for a proper understanding of communication in postcolonial societies, as pointed out by Anchimbe among others (NWOYE, 1992; DE KADT, 1998; EGNER, 2006; KASSANGA & LWANGA-LUMU, 2007). The lecturer underscores the need of working with local categories through local concepts, i.e., building a framework through an emic perspective. Citing De Kadt (1998), he shows that the researcher borrows local (Zulu, in this case) concepts such as ‘*ubuntu*’<sup>1</sup> and ‘*hlonipha*’<sup>2</sup> in order to emphasize the centrality of these concepts in interaction and communication in postcolonial environments (as in South Africa, in the given example). In other words, researchers should find local key cultural-linguistics concepts – often expressed through words and common expressions – which encompass world views of the society where interaction takes place, such that this material may help to better understand extralinguistic features of interaction.

Colonial contact has had a relevant impact on the history, cultural norms, ethnic identities, spoken languages, religions, attribution of social status, and the way people understand gender and age in formerly colonized countries. As a result of the mixture of precolonial societies’ languages,

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1 I.e. being considerate out of solidarity with others.

2 I.e. verbalized and non-verbalized respect-based avoidance hearer-oriented. The term emphasizes the expression of cooperativeness and respect of the hearer’s desire.

concepts, and social patterns of interaction with those brought by the colonizers – and the addition of formal education and political systems –, postcolonial settings are characterized by hybridism. In formerly colonized countries, one can find a variety of hybridized forms of concepts, language, social norms, and speech (e.g. code-mixing and code-switching). Moreover, before colonization, languages had a group-individual affiliation in an ethnic and tribal level, whereas colonialism saw languages from the perspective of nation-state affiliations on a country level. Anchimbe thus argues for the importance of taking into account the specificities of postcolonial contexts when developing pragmatic analysis, for in many cases the hybridized features present in context are essential for a deep understanding of the meanings brought about in interaction. Anchimbe stresses that even though the hybridized forms vary from society to society (depending on the length and type of colonial mixtures), they are significantly similar.

In his presentation, Anchimbe drew examples from Cameroon, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Ghana. The first example consists of an interaction in an open market in Yaoundé, where two female vendors from different ethnicities (Eton and Bamileke) quarrel over a potential buyer. In the conversation, ethnicity issues are brought up, for group-directed insults seem to hurt more than individual ones. Despite the fact that speakers are communicating to each other in French, they both use words of their interlocutor's languages to attack them, thus not insulting them individually, but rather as part of a group. This is also shown in the fourth given example, taken from the Nigerian play *The Gods Are not to Blame* by Ola Rotimi (1971).

Additionally, the first example's dialogue reflects the notion of a group face through the use of plural pronouns bearing on the notion that "face is actually found to wear different cultural faces" (NWOYE, 1992, p. 328). Also important is the fact that both speakers exhibit multilingual repertoires and languages demonstrate to be markers of community membership. Therefore, linguistic aspects of the interaction are found to be inextricably intertwined with hybrid cultural and social norms, leading to hybridized interaction patterns which are the main object of Postcolonial Pragmatics.

In the second example given by Anchimbe, a senior colleague offers a drink to a junior colleague, who refuses it. The senior will not accept the refusal until a proper religious reason for it is provided by the younger man. According to Anchimbe, this example elucidates important social norms related to age and religion, which are typical of postcolonial societies. This example is critical, as it makes explicit one of Anchimbe's important claim, namely, that 'speech acts' as defined by Searle (1969) cannot account for interaction situations in postcolonial settings, which would be better described as speech events where communicative acts take place. The latter are not always constrained to just one grammatical sentence as Searle proposes; speech events encompass communicative acts which stretch through many speech acts, and often present a combination of more than one type of act (e.g. preparatory, supportive).

Anchimbe also underlines the fact that Western speech acts, such as requests, apologies, thanks and offers/refusals, often have different implications if compared to the postcolonial societies. In the third example, there is also a situation of offer refusal, in the context of a seat in a church, where an old man refuses the offer of a younger man to take his seat. In this case, the younger man seems

to be especially concerned, as he feels he is being judged by people around him for being seated – by explicitly alluding to people watching – while the older man is standing. The example shows the relevance of bystander effect in a community where there is a larger concern about the implications of your acts to the others, as well as what other people may think of you – what Anchimbe calls a ‘collectivist culture’. Postcolonial Pragmatics’ aim is to bring forth hybrid cultural meanings as such to analysis of interactions.

The fourth example is taken from a Nigerian play; the fifth, from a radio show in Cameroon; and the sixth, from a political advertisement in Mozambique. I shall not go into detail and talk about each of them, as did Anchimbe in his talk, but it is relevant to state that all these examples also rely on hierarchy based on difference of age, accounting for community values, bringing ethnicity matter to communication, among other communication strategies which have been shaped by the heterogeneous postcolonial environments in which speakers interact on a daily basis. These factors intertwine with language, which might only be perceived, according to Anchimbe, through the lens of Postcolonial Pragmatics.

Broadly speaking, Postcolonial Pragmatics consists on an attempt of including multilingual, multicultural contexts in the analysis of real-life contextualized interactions, an issue that has been frequently overlooked and neglected in the pragmatics enterprise. Ultimately, Postcolonial Pragmatics is a program focused on advancing on the need to think of linguistic theory from the perspective of non-Western languages and cultures, since phenomena drawn from Western – and mostly Indo-European – languages are too frequently posited as universal, although tested exclusively on Anglo-American contexts and thus insufficient to apprehend large part of the language contexts found nowadays worldwide. Anchimbe concludes his lecture with an invitation for us to leave our comfort zones in linguistic research and start taking complexity into account.

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