Interview with Ana Deumert, from the University of Cape Town, professor and researcher of Critical Language Policy, Colonial Linguistics and Sociolinguistics. Author of *Sociolinguistics and Mobile Communication*, 2014; *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, 2006; and *Language Standardization and Language Change*, 2004. Deumert is currently organizing *Colonial Linguistics* and *Varieties of German Worldwide.*

WP: Tell us about your studies on Language Policy. What have you been focusing on?

AD: My work is actually not so much about language policy, as it is about the everyday lives of people, and how they engage with language and signification in all its forms. But this, obviously, has implications for language policy: we would want to promote language policies that are aware of, and respond to, people's understanding and experiences of language. So I think this has been my focus: the ways in which people 'language' (to use a verb rather than a noun) to make meaning, to interact, but also to be creative, to produce poetry and other forms of verbal art.

WP: What concept of language do you work with?

AD: This is a difficult question to answer, and maybe I can answer by citing the title of Julia Kristeva's history of linguistics: 'Language the Unknown'. To me language is still unknown, still an enigma, still something we work on understanding, but not something – a thing, an object – that we understand just as yet. I don't believe in limiting and defining language, positioning it as an object that we can study. This has been the strategy of linguists since de Saussure; saying, for example, that we must focus on *langue*, but not *parole*. Later Chomsky implored us to study 'competence', but not 'performance'. All these are attempts to reduce the complexity of what language and signification is about – my approach is the opposite: I want to explore language and signification in all its complexity and messiness, its diversity, creativity, and, often, unruliness.

And in this way my view of language is somewhat at odds with conventional ideas of language policy, i.e. a belief that we can regulate language use, indeed that we can police it. (It is no coincidence that policy and police both stem from the same root, Latin, *politia*, 'civil administration').

WP: What does it mean "Critical Language Policy" How does it differ from other perspectives on

Language Policy?

For me the 'critical' resonates with the idea of 'critical theory' as articulated by the Frankfurt School. It expresses a particular philosophical perspective on culture; a perspective that foregrounds the social, historical, and, especially, ideological forces and structures that shape it. In this sense, critical is always about power: the power relations that shape language policies. In many ways then 'critical language policy' is not about 'doing' language policy, but about analysing/interrogating/deconstructing existing language policy regimes. As such it is part of a broader critical tradition. At the same time, we should not see critique as something that is only negative – critique is necessary because it enables us to think in new ways. As such, I see 'critical language policy' also as a project of social transformation; that is, as a political project that is deeply invested in overcoming diverse and lasting forms of linguistic inequality (in the sense of Hymes); a political project that emphasises the importance of language in realizing social transformation.

WP: How does Language Policy in Africa can teach us about how to be critical?

AD: Reflecting on language in Africa – as well as other post-colonial contexts – offers us an opportunity to think deeply about diversity. Enumeration of languages is obviously a problem: should we ever think of languages as objects that are countable? Such caveats notwithstanding, postcolonial societies are shaped by linguistic diversity, they are very complex societies and this challenges conventional, modernist understandings of language policy. Indeed, it challenges our very idea of languages as well defined objects of analysis and policy intervention. And, of course, what Walter Mignolo calls 'coloniality' is very present in Africa, and this brings in questions of power and ideology very strongly.

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