

Report on the 17th AILA World Congress of the International Association of Applied Linguistics from 10-15 August 2014 in Brisbane, Australia

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This report discusses the recent International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) World Congress in Brisbane, Australia, one of the preeminent applied linguistics conferences. In this paper, I focus on issues of relevance to academics in applied linguistics and language teaching professionals such as language variety and language planning. Additionally, new trends in the field like linguistic landscape (LL), lookalike language and the new Chinglish are discussed for their value in understanding the English-language-teaching environment in China.

The title of the conference, “One World, Many Languages”, was reflected in the diversity of participants who attended. Over 1600 delegates from 75 countries were in attendance; a tally of languages represented would undoubtedly number in the hundreds—Australia itself is home to more than 200 aboriginal languages. Not only was this the 17th AILA World Congress, but it was also the 50th anniversary of the first AILA conference which was held in Nancy, France in 1964.

The conference kicked off dramatically on Sunday, 10 August, with a representative of one of the Australian aboriginal tribes entering the lecture hall while chanting and then marking the conference as officially open in grand ceremonial fashion. Both Professor Bernd Rüschoff, the current AILA President, and Andy Kirkpatrick, President of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia, gave brief welcome speeches to the delegates. The host

organisation, The University of Queensland, was acknowledged as were the co-chairs, Dr. Christina Gitsaki, and the late Professor Dick Baldauf. The organisers publicly recognised Baldauf’s role in planning this conference during the previous three years, as well as his significant impact on the field of applied linguistics.

Fittingly, the first keynote speaker was Professor Nicholas Evans, who has conducted extensive fieldwork on the aboriginal languages of northern Australia. His main interest is in combatting the language death of Australia and Papua New Guinea’s many indigenous languages and, along with that, the loss of their way of “organizing meaning.” He provided an unusual example of how one of the Aboriginal languages he studies uses pronouns that indicate the generational and kinship relationships of the interlocutors. He argues that these important markers of meaning in different cultures will disappear as the languages they are now present in become extinct.

Another highly anticipated and well-attended plenary session was Elana Shohamy’s on linguistic landscape (LL). As mentioned earlier, the study of linguistic landscape is a fairly new field of inquiry within sociolinguistics and language planning, which will soon have its own journal, suitably titled, *Linguistic Landscape*. This 21st century discipline investigates signage and oral language usage in areas of language contact to determine how they reflect or influence the vitality and/or

power of multiple languages. As compared to the field of language planning's earlier emphasis on language policies at the national or top-down level, or "*de jure* language planning," this emergent field looks at how individuals, institutions and corporations use language in public spaces – a more bottom-up approach – as a marker of "*de facto* language planning." One example provided from her research in Israel was particularly telling. In one of the multilingual Hebrew-Arabic linguistic landscapes she was investigating, emergency room and bomb shelter signs were only in Hebrew. She argues that the choice to exclude Arabic from these signs could be indicative of a larger policy of exclusion.

Related to the concept of linguistic landscape, Jan Blommaert's plenary argued for more research to be conducted on what he calls "lookalike language." In his talk, he explained that "unimportant language" on signs or even t-shirts can be investigated as an important indicator of identity or belonging: "Linguistically 'empty' signifiers [are] indexically 'full.'" In his travels around the globe, he has noticed that there are an increasing number of signs and names of stores or products which are identifiable as a particular language but which are linguistically nonsensical. Blommaert particularly singled out China as being a country replete with examples of Lookalike Language in the many restaurants with fake French names which are supposed to evoke a particular ambiance, or products with English names that are void of meaning.

The final plenary session of the Congress was presented by Li Wei, a highly respected Chinese researcher and scholar on multilingualism and intercultural communication from Birkbeck College, University of London. He discussed the fact that there are now more learners of English than native speakers who interact using the web, which is leading to a "post-multilingual" world. In this new realm, languages are mixed freely and creatively, and "Chinglish" celebrities such as Joe Liu emerge on video websites doing impersonations of speakers from different regions of China speaking English (for example, http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/BC92F_gRgWI). He provided instances in which

Chinese citizens are adapting English to their own experiences. For example, instead of the common terms, "livelihood," "stock market" and "together," these new netizens have coined the expressions "livelihard," "stuck market" and "togayther." He calls this "new Chinglish" a type of creative language use or "translanguaging."

A growing area of research which was discussed at various sessions was the use of "English as a Lingua Franca" in international high-stakes encounters, such as asylum procedures and court interpreting. In one invited symposium convened by Barbara Seidlhofer, one of the presenters, Brigitta Busch, discussed her research into the use of English as the lingua franca of asylum hearings for immigrants in Austria. In these "high-stakes" encounters, English is usually not the native language of anyone involved; neither the asylum seeker nor the judge who will determine whether asylum is granted. After her research group's discourse analysis of court transcripts showed that there was little to no understanding of the concept of world Englishes, which often led to attributions of asylum seekers' mental capacity based on their ability to speak a standard English, her team started conducting workshops with judges to raise their consciousness to this fact. In the same symposium, many academics who are non-native writers (NNW) of English were keenly interested in Mary Jane Curry's presentation of the findings of her Professional Academic Writing (PAW) in Global Context study. In her discussion, she described the "near total dominance of English journals" due to the prominence of the Web of Science citation indexing system in the granting of promotion and tenure within academia. She explained that NNW of English are often disadvantaged because the editors of these English journals function as "literary brokers" or "gatekeepers of journals" imposing standards that are very rigid and do not allow room for negotiation.

Another interesting featured symposium was convened by Terrence G. Wiley of the Center of Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. and James W. Tollefson of the University of Hong Kong. Rani Rubdy from Nanyang

Technological University in Singapore and Sandra Lee McKay of San Francisco State University discussed the Singaporean government's attempts to influence its citizens' use of English. In 2000, the government introduced the "Speak Good English" campaign with its slogan of "Speak proper. Be understood." to counter the popularity of the local variety, Singlish. Rubdy mentioned a popular website, The TalkingCock.com, which encourages Singaporeans to "preserve and advance the authentic voice of Singaporeans." Joe LoBianco discussed how native speakers of English, as well as non-native speakers are

resistant to the acceptance of non-standard varieties. He cited the historic example of Margaret Thatcher deriding non-standard English dialects as "rubbish language."

The presentations singled out for discussion above were simply a small sample of the more than 1500 sessions at the 17th AILA World Congress in Brisbane, and there is sure to be a plethora of intriguing new topics at the next AILA World Congress taking place in 2017 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The organisers of the Rio conference are inviting all to come and experience the multilingual, multicultural country of Brazil.



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