
Conference Review

A Review of The International Society of Language Studies (ISLS) 2019 Conference

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The International Society for Language Studies (ISLS), co-sponsored by The Open University of Hong Kong (<https://www.isls.co>), held a conference in Hong Kong from June 20-22, 2019. The theme of the conference was “Disrupting and Recreating Beliefs in Language Studies.” ISLS has had annual conferences since 2002 and is composed of an active group of researchers worldwide who thrive on critical studies which seek to foster cross disciplinary and participate in the ongoing restructuring of the Humanities and Social Sciences while contesting conventional frames and perspectives, whether historical or current. A main objective of the conference was to bridge “arbitrary disciplinary territories and provide a forum for both theoretical and empirical research, from existing and emergent research methodologies, for exploring the relationships among language, power, discourses, and social practices” (quoted from the call for papers).

They publish such studies in an excellent series of books and their well-known flagship journal: *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*. I highly recommend this annual conference to all teacher-researchers who also see themselves as wanting to improve society and the world and are not afraid of critical discussions.

Selected conference papers will be published in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies: An International Journal* or in the *Readings in Language Studies* a peer-reviewed book series in 2020. Both publication

opportunities are peer-reviewed and extremely professional from my personal experiences with them (see Murphey, 2019; Johnson & Murphey, 2018).

This year, 2019, about 150 participants from all over the world met for three days, and about 90-100 presentations were given. Thus, about two thirds of the attendants were also presenters which made for a very interactive and dialectical conference with deep conversations, considerations, conceptualizations, and collaborations, and most importantly, a lot of learning and opening of minds.

I went to my first ISLS conference in Hawaii 2017 and I immediately appreciated the participants desire to engage with each other, the world, and critical issues that could make the world a better place. So, this was my second conference, and it was held in the middle of the Hong Kong political protests against the criminal extradition bill conducted by 12 local student organizations and the general population. While Hong Kong is hot and humid at this time of year, the protests made it even more intense.

On June 21 and 22, the Hong Kong government closed down its offices and cancelled all meeting due to the protests. The universality of language, equity issues, ethics, communication, and political justice makes the ISLS group immediately primed to engage with such issues and how they play themselves out in the real world. While our academic presentations did not directly address the protests themselves, there was an underlying feeling of striving for social justice. Although not explicitly addressed in the presentations, the protests were the main topic during many coffee breaks.

The opening communal session for the conference was on target, with three Hong Kong professors: first Miron Bhowmik on “The Critical Race Perspective in Language Dominating Discourses”; second Carlos Soto on “Reconsidering Criticality in Late Capitalism: Implications for Language Based Research”; third was Michelle Gu on “A Spacious-Temporal Analysis of the Interplay Between Identity, Power, and Discourse: Migrant families as the Locus of Investigation”. After each speaker gave a short presentation on their themes, they then discussed more generally inequities for minoritized communities in Hong Kong and how research on language has both disrupted and reified these inequities in education. There was also a chance for questions from the audience concerning

the emerging sites of promise and struggle for social justice in Hong Kong and its position as a Special Administrative Region of mainland China.

Some other highlights were presentations by Kirsten Woitek (George Mason University) on “The Imagined Community: How Language Practices and Beliefs (Re) Construct Language Learner Identity.” She framed students “imagined communities” with Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory (based on Freud). Ming-Tso Chien, a graduate student at the University of Maine, presented “Autoethnography as Counter-Storytelling from an International Teaching Assistant”, and discussed these assistant positions that are rapidly increasing. On the lighter side So-Yeon Ahn (City University of Hong Kong) presented “Language Play as a Site for Challenging Beliefs in an English Classroom” which presented students not only displaying their linguistic knowledge but also allowing them to create a carnivalesque atmosphere that can temporarily transform, subvert, and/or disrupt the conventional interactions in schools. Misato Matsuoka (Teikyo University) had similar positive things to say in her presentation “Laughter in Medical Interaction” about the benefits of enjoying ourselves.

Debasmita Roychowdhury (Dona Ana Community College, USA) presented one of the best and most critically aware presentations at the conference; it was entitled “Critical Media Literacy as Carnival of Multiple Literacies in the Era of Massive Digital Brainwashing.” Her second slide looked like this:

Multiplicity of communication channels, media, and modalities of representation require new types of literacies and understanding.

- In the era of pervasive digital technology, we need to develop new literacies: Information Literacy; Critical Media Literacy; Critical Digital Media Literacy; Political Literacy
- The notion of Carnival (Bakhtin) refers to subverting and undermining the powerful social conventions creatively in an attempt to attain empowerment and liberation. (copied with permission)

Her call for a variety of new literacies is in line with our “evolving medias” and their evolving natures confounded not only with fake or false news but with

surveillance on our own privacy. She cited McChesney (2013) who says within the title of his book: “How capitalism is turning the internet against democracy”. She also cited Vaidhyathan’s *Antisocial Media*; Turkle’s *Alone together*, and Huesemann & Huesemann’s, *Techno-fix: Why technology won’t save us or the environment*. She went on to cite Zuboff (2019), whose title says it all: *Age of Surveillance Capitalism: “We Thought We Were Searching Google, But Google Was Searching Us”*. She succinctly stated her point when she said, “Asymmetry of knowledge has created power imbalance: They know everything about us; we know almost nothing about them” (Zuboff, 2019).

It was especially nice to see many graduate students displaying criticality in their dissertations and other research. I was especially shaken by Alex Kasula who reopened our eyes to the fate of Marshall Islands' inhabitants who are being told their islands will be uninhabitable in 50 years due to global warming and the rising sea polluting their fresh water reserves with sea water, and the continued U.S. military use of their islands as testing grounds for nuclear and other weapons. Yet Kasula's research was about creating a critical discourse of hope among his university students to think about solutions and alternatives rather than sinking into despair.

Two other graduate students from the University of Hawaii, Jiaxin Ruan and Jiamin Ruan, dared to get their Chinese classes to engage with project-based learning. Their findings showed the crucial value of implementing critical perspectives in Chinese language education and getting students to explore local Chinese culture in terms of Chinese restaurants, community centers, and music and other intangible cultural attributes.

This theme of persistence within criticality seemed to be repeating several times at this conference. When my presentation came around, I had technical difficulties that many people helped me resolve if not solve. Their “trying to help” and the good vibrations gave me hope and courage. In the end, I was able to give one of the best presentations I have ever given, which was a lovely mix of improvisation, interesting questions, and a deeper understanding of my topic, social testing (Murphey, 2019).

When others are doing their best to help us, even when the help doesn't

succeed, it seems to give us courage and hope. It is said that hope has three components: goals, pathways thinking, and agency thinking. Agency thinking is having the confidence that you will succeed, which seems to come from others trying to help you (even if they can't in the end). My point being that this organization, ISLS, while primed to be critical, is also an extremely helpful and collaborative group whose altruism is contagious.

To conclude, if you admire the kind of criticality that is looking to improve the socio-ecological, political, and pedagogical areas of our lives, ISLS is an exciting group to belong to and I highly recommend their conferences and publications. They are a small society, have very active with meaningful goals, and love diversity and good conversations. Have a look at their publications and website for more in depth information. The coffee and refreshments each morning, and during the 15-minute breaks between sessions, were amazing and much appreciated, adding greatly to our positive criticality and interactive conversations. And the student helpers who guided us around the Open University were also precious.

Author bio

Tim Murphey has studied and taught in Europe for 15 years and in Asia for another 30. At present, he teaches at Aoyama University, Kanda University of International Studies, and graduate school at Wayo Women's University, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, and Kanda. He researches positive sociology, student voice, motivation, and Vygotskian sociocultural theory. He loves teaching, juggling, skiing and finding positive ways to teach and learn. mitsmail1@gmail.com

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