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The petals of the Indian lotus¹ – Debi and diversities
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Abstract

Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson
The petals of the Indian lotus ...

The article notes the importance of Dr Pattanayak's work internationally. His analysis of multilingualism was more sophisticated than was any Western scholarship, and much more appropriate for an informed understanding of Indian realities. His work is not as well known in the West as it should be. It is more insightful than much fashionable postmodern linguistic scholarship. His writings – which are extensively cited in the article, a selection from a wide range of his brilliant texts – reveal pioneer thinking in explaining the relationship between language and inequality, exploitation, injustice, and linguistic imperialism. This had a profound impact on our own scholarship in this field. Dr Pattanayak – or as we prefer to think of him, Debi – warned against the misguided belief that increased monolingualism in a dominant language, and related technocratic and neoliberal principles imported from the West, would lead to social justice or harmony, quite the opposite. Multiplicity and diversity are intrinsically valuable and need to be cherished. They should not be blindly replaced by a faith in 'progress' and 'civilisation' that invalidates existing cultures and knowledge systems. There is a valid case for mother-tongue based multilingual education, and seeing language rights as fundamental human rights.

Debi was ahead of his time in seeing that successfully building on mother tongues would also provide a solid foundation for competence in English and Hindi. It is tragic that education in recent decades, in India and elsewhere, has consolidated the power of elites, through an excessive focus on English, at the expense of the mass of the population. The alternative is to strengthen linguistic human rights, a thrust which is now influential worldwide. Many relevant human rights instruments are cited, as well as the research evidence of successful multilingual education, from the USA, Africa, and ongoing tribal language-based education in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh, and the rationale for Indigenous cultures and languages to be mainstreamed. Debi's life work has been transformative.

The first two gifts that Tove received from Debi, in 1972, when they first met at a UNESCO conference in Paris, were a sandalwood necklace, and gentle criticism when she used the term 'bilingualism'. Later Debi deepened the criticism: 'Tove, which five of my seven languages do you want me to chuck out when you reduce me to two only, by using "bilingualism"?' This was merely the first of the many gifts that both of us have had from Debi over decades. There are few people in the world who have taught us as much as Debi. His Socratean/Gandhian way of gentle teaching made the chela/guru relationship into a relationship of give and take. We have been fortunate to spend time with Debi and his wife (and sometimes children) in their homes in Mysore and in Bhubaneswar, in Tove's earlier home in Helsinki, on our little farm in Tronninge Mose in Denmark, and at many conferences all over the world.

Debi pioneered the study of many language policy issues that caught on in the West much later, and which Western scholarship has tended to be given all the credit for. Critical theory has influenced many social sciences over the past three decades, though the extent to which it has actually succeeded in significantly contributing to greater social justice is debatable. Debi was in the forefront of thinking critically about his academic professionalism.

When considering 'new' directions/trends in multilingualism studies over the last decade in the 'West', it is obvious that many of the trends are not new at all. The issues have been discussed eminently well for a long time in what the journal *New Internationalist* calls 'the Majority World'. We chose to dedicate the book *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*, edited by Ajit Mohanty, Minati Panda and us two (Orient Blackswan 2009) to two intellectual and philosophical giants in sociolinguistics, Debi, and Joshua Fishman. One of the characteristics that connects them is that both have always been both timeless, and much ahead of their times. Some of the topical western discussions right now about

fluid boundaries between languages, constant changes in languages and cultures, multiple identities, "doing" language, all are something that, for instance, many Indian sociolinguists and psycholinguists (Khubchandani, Pattanayak, Annamalai, Dua, Mohanty, Dasgupta, etc) have been describing for decades – there is nothing new in the sudden "western" realizations of it. Ajit Mohanty's formulation sums it up in his description of India:

the fluidity of perceived boundaries between languages, smooth and complementary functional allocation of languages into different domains of use, multiplicity of linguistic identities and early multilingual socialization (Mohanty et al. 1999).

It is tempting to enthuse about these 'new' fads (Skutnabb-Kangas 2010).

It is significant that when Professor R. N. Srivastava of the University of Delhi wrote a Preface to a collection of Debi's articles on language, culture and education in multilingual India (Pattanayak 1991), he stressed the significance of Debi insisting that Western theories of language and linguistics are inappropriate in Third World contexts, and invalid when they claim to be free of ideological presuppositions. What is therefore needed is critical linguistics. Srivastava continues:

Critical linguistics builds the perspective to the study of language from within. It is centred around the ethos that comes into being from within the core of reality. It rejects the process of theory-building that is situation-neutral or derivative of some other theories [...] drawn from the monolingual situation. [...] Even such basic notions like ‘dialect’, ‘standard’, ‘mother-tongue’, etc., as defined in standard textbooks of linguistics, are unable to find their operational significance and applicational relevance in our real verbal situation’ (Srivastava 1991, viii).

He is confident that Debi’s scholarship can serve to make research critical and true to the Indian reality. The wish to be a critical scholar now applies to a number of Western scholars, but the efforts are far from unproblematical. Work that claims to ‘deconstruct’ languages by tracing some of the misguided linguistic language naming of missionaries (e.g. Pennycook and Makoni 2005) runs the risk of depriving oppressed minorities of their linguistic identity and of denying them the opportunity to assert their language rights. This is the opposite of what Debi’s scholarship and active professional life stood for.

When influential researchers (like Alastair Pennycook, Jan Blommaert and Stephen May) now claim that languages (and thus mother tongues) do not exist, and that there is at the most a contingent if any relationship between language and identity, their attempts at showing this pale in comparison with Debi’s much more post-post-post modern and at the same time age-old way of confirming the relationship:

Places are not geographical concepts; they exist in people’s consciousness. So does the concept of “‘mother tongue’”. It is not a language in the general sense of the word, neither is it a dialect. It is an identity signifier waiting to be explained (Pattanayak 1992).

Common to our two gurus (Debi and Joshua Fishman) is also that they have stayed loyal to their beliefs about where they feel they belong (in terms of religious/ philosophical beliefs or country), and working for the benefit of endangered languages and/or groups/peoples. The price they have paid for doing this has been high. One price difference has been that since Joshua Fishman lives in the USA and writes mainly in English, he has become very famous internationally. Debi could have stayed in the West too, after his doctorate at Cornell University (where the university wished him to study for it for three years, but he insisted on completing it in two). However, he chose to return to India. He writes in Oriya and Hindi in addition to English. This has meant that his writings have not reached the global book-reading public more than marginally.

Now India has a sixth of the world’s population, and among Indian sociolinguists Debi is without any doubt the most brightly shining star. But without Ivan Illich, who more or less forced Debi to put together the book *Multilingualism and Mother-Tongue Education* (1981a), he would be even less well known in the West.

What Illich experienced in Mysore, with Debi as director of the Central Institute for Indian Languages, and as Illich’s Hindi teacher, was

the atmosphere that reigned there among the staff; a disciplined and respectful collegiality that here and there became festive, an atmosphere that common dedication creates rarely in a scientific institution, a mood that – if it ever has existed in a university department – is remembered for decades like a legend (from Illich's 'Foreword' to Pattanayak 1981a).

Debi's own introduction to the same book decries how

the destruction of mother tongues represents a situation of language imperialism, wherein the dominant and the standard wears the badge of privilege and acts as the passport to rank, status and wealth (Pattanayak 1981, xiii).

This insight, and his use of the term 'language imperialism' which was invisible in Western scholarship at the time, inspired our own later work in this field, the development of the concept linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas 1986) and the theorisation and exploration of the mechanisms of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992).

The same paragraph (Pattanayak 1981, xiii) refers to an economic system in which

the rich tend to become richer and the poor poorer, in the field of education the affluent and the advanced tend to become more schooled, acquire the keys to privilege and the instruments for controlling the keys to privilege and the instruments for controlling society.

Sadly, this was a voice in the wilderness. This unjust economic system became entrenched with the neoliberal economic policies that have been progressively implemented since the 1980s, and the corporate world's manipulation of global finance, which the Indian government chose to opt into. The result is that the injustices that Debi denounced have been intensified in India, just as they have been in the USA and UK.

Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas (2010) note that the neoliberal tendency is towards homogenisation. They continue (*ibid.*, 327-328):

Homogenisation reduces or eliminates cultural and linguistic diversity; diversity is seen as preventing integration and leading to a 'clash of civilisations'. Simultaneously, the tendency is to keep and promote the unthreatening 'nice' aspects of cultural (but not linguistic) diversity. Education authorities in many countries work with similar perceptions: if children were to be taught through the medium of their mother tongues, they would be segregated from each other, they would not learn to know each other, to live together, and they could not learn each others' languages and cultures. This would inevitably lead to conflict.

Debi has captured these unfounded threats in the following quotes:

While Weinstein, an eminent political scientist looking at the American structure asks "how much diversity can this structure tolerate?", a person in a Third World country must ask "how much uniformity can that structure

tolerate?" ... The Western view is linear and binary, whereas the Eastern is cyclical and spiral. However, the westernized eastern elites, who are in charge of planning, follow essentially the Western worldview (Pattanayak 1991: 31).

Political scientists in the developing Third World, tutored in the theory and methodology of the social science of the West, also join the chorus and repeat ad nauseam that plurality is a threat to the stability of the fragile State. They forget that in these countries freedom is more fragile than the State ... It is inconceivable that there was a single language for all human beings at any time since human societies were formed. Multiplicity and diversity are the characteristics of nature (Pattanayak 1981a: 3, vii).

Many Western social scientists in development studies are now discussing 'fragile states', three decades after Debi's insightful analysis – but still repeating the same mantras about plurality as a threat. In order to escape the 'fragility', these states, for instance in Africa, are supposed to let themselves be managed towards 'good governance' and 'democracy' of the Western type, with neoliberal 'modernisation', progress, and homogenisation as a means – and more conflicts as one of the results.

The universality of the concept of 'progress' (which is a central element in 'Western civilisation') has often been taken for granted in development theory. There has been a 'development' of successive paradigms, from seeing underdeveloped countries (and peoples, especially the ITMs) as primitive and savage, through evolutionary and modernism theories (where the countries are 'developing') to core-periphery and dependency theories, to world systems theories (Wallerstein 1990a,b) and beyond (e.g. Appadurai 1990). Still, in *all* of them there seems to be a strand about the self-evidence of evolution and progress as necessary and positive. This strand, noted by Alfonso Ortiz, himself Indigenous Pueblo from the United States, 'a tendency when non-Indians write "Indian history" ... has long bothered me ... the implicit "up from darkness" strain of thought ... the view of the inevitability of "enlightenment" or "progress"' (quoted in Costo 1987: 25). "Indians" here are the Native peoples of North America, but his observations are equally valid for other Indigenous/tribal peoples in other parts of the world. He continues (*ibid.*, 26):

Historians and anthropologists who write in this vein treat Indian tribal peoples as if they were also grinding, inevitably, inexorably, up the stepladder of progressive enlightenment and toward greater complexity. To insist on perceiving something that is not there is to distort the true experience of these people.

... perhaps we Indian people who survived with the essences of our cultures intact really want to make contributions first and foremost to the continued survival and perpetuation of these cultures, rather than to something called "civilization", which is, after all, alien to our traditional cultures, and usually antagonistic to them as well.

'The devaluation and delegitimation of local knowledges are symptomatic of the knowledge feudalism and triumphalist hegemony of secular, white-supremacist, capitalist modernity, which epitomizes the inherent coloniality of Western knowledge', Ahmed Kabel writes (email, 2010). In order to make a break with the colonisation of knowledge, Susanne Pérez (2009: 213-214) uses Catherine Walsh's

proposed construction of an ‘epistemic interculturality’ as a tool for reflection in a Peruvian programme in Indigenous teacher training sessions that she has participated in planning and conducting:

(...) the construction of new epistemological frames that incorporate and negotiate occidental and non-occidental knowledges, indigenous but also black (and their theoretical and lived bases, from the past but also from the present), always maintaining as fundamental the necessity of confronting coloniality of power to which these knowledges have been submitted (Walsh 2004: 4, quoted in Pérez 2009: 213).

One of Debi’s strengths has been to legitimate and universalise local knowledges, while being deeply aware of and incorporating truly universal knowledge from other places (geographic as well as spiritual).

Debi’s article ‘Human rights and language rights’, based on a series of lectures at the University of Mysore (Pattanayak 1981b), refers to limitations internationally and nationally that prevent linguistic minorities from receiving education through the medium of their mother tongue. This is combined with the misplaced belief that English-medium education ‘is equal to modernisation’, whereas in reality it merely serves to facilitate the control of the elite of India’s administration and mass communications (ibid., 8). In many of his writings, Debi integrates the exploration of language issues with a wide range of social, economic and philosophical issues. These are brought together in a publication (Pattanayak 1987) that resulted from two spells of residence in the United Kingdom. It synthesizes Indian experience for a British and international English-reading readership and also assesses the impact of racism and multiculturalism in the British experience. He makes an articulate, crisp plea for diversity in education in India, but, as usual, his point is extremely relevant in the rest of the world:

English is part of the multilingual and multicultural heritage of India. Instead of wasting time debating whether English education is necessary, it is high time that Indian educationalists and parents gave priority and attention to improved Indian language education at the primary stages to be supplemented by good English and Hindi language education with opportunities to learn more languages as an option at higher secondary stages (Pattanayak 1987: 27).

The false focus on education through the medium of a single language is not merely the bane of education in India in the 21st century. It is a major problem worldwide, with increasing numbers of children in Africa being confronted with ‘English-only’ schooling; with the mushrooming of English-medium elite schools in Asia, the Middle East and continental Europe that educate a more or less monolingual elite and prepare them for the international baccalaureate; and with English increasingly used in higher education worldwide, often at the expense of local languages. The European Union pleads for diversity of language learning, along similar lines to Debi’s recommendations, but market forces in Europe are strengthening the position of English at the expense of other foreign languages.

For many decades Debi has, together with some of us others, been convinced that well-organised mother-tongue-based multilingual education will result in reaching the

goals (here in Tove's version from many publications) that good education should reach:

A good educational programme leads to the following outcomes from the point of view of Indigenous/ tribal /minority /minoritised (ITM) children's language(s), identity, economic opportunity and life chances:

1. high levels of multilingualism;
2. a fair chance of achieving academically at school;
3. strong, positive multilingual and multicultural identities and positive attitudes towards self and others; and
4. a fair chance of awareness and competence building as prerequisites for working for a more equitable world, for oneself and one's own group as well as others, locally and globally.

With examples from both India and elsewhere, Debi argues (1981) for the executive and judiciary to implement language rights. This exemplifies his capacity to develop a powerful intellectual argument and to stress that principles without implementation are valueless. Linguistic human rights are now a major international concern in the Council of Europe and UNESCO, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (Magga et al. 2005, Dunbar & Skutnabb-Kangas 2008, Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010), in legal research (e.g. de Varennes 1996, Thornberry 1991), and in sociolinguistics (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). It is important to anchor the goals not only in educational, psychological, sociological and linguistic research, but also in a human rights discourse, as has been done in Skutnabb-Kangas and Dunbar 2010: 43-44:

For indigenous and tribal children, these goals/outcomes can be built especially on the following formulations in human rights instruments (all the emphases are ours):

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) states in Art. 13.1

“Indigenous peoples have the *right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations* their histories, *languages*, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons” (Art. 13.1).

Art. 14 (1 and 2) states: “1. Indigenous peoples have the *right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages*, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning”; and “2. Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of *education of the State* without discrimination”.

The first two quotes imply that the child has the right to learn the mother tongue. Since most forms and levels of the “education of the State” (14.2) use the “State” languages as a medium, the child cannot have access to this education without knowing the State language. These quotes together imply that high levels of at least bilingualism (goal 1 above) must be a goal in the education of an Indigenous/ tribal child.

According to **ILO Convention No. 169**, Art. 29

The imparting of general knowledge and skills that will help children belonging to the peoples concerned to *participate fully and on an equal footing in their own community and in the national community* shall be the aim of education for these peoples.

One of the implications is that Indigenous and tribal children's right to education is not respected unless they become bilingual and bicultural through schooling (especially Goal 1); otherwise they cannot participate fully in both communities. In order to be in contact with one's family, community, culture and ancestry, to know who one is and where one comes from, to be able to build a strong rooted identity, one needs a well developed mother tongue (or two). To be able to choose one's educational career and to have a choice on the labour market, and to participate in democratic processes in the country where one lives, one needs a well-developed national/official language (or two). Both/all are an absolute necessity for ITMs, and formal education plays a decisive role in the access to them (Goals 1, 2 and 4).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states in Art. 29 that the education of the child shall be directed to

[t]he development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

Goals/outcomes 2 and 3 above are aspects of this development "to their fullest potential". Art. 29 also asks education to be directed towards "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin". Goal 4 above represents this direction.

Of course, the education of ITM children also has to fulfill further demands that can be made on any good education. These include issues about "the four A's" (*availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability*; see Chapter 2) presented by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education in her reports, e.g. removing the barriers to access to education (see our references to Tomaševski, especially her 2001).

We are mainly concentrating on the language of instruction in promoting these goals/reaching these outcomes. We have two main reasons for this. First: among the many factors that influence the extent to which the goals are reached, the medium of instruction, and especially the number of years that the MT/first language is the main medium, is the most vital, according to many studies, for instance the world's largest study comparing various models of minority education (Thomas & Collier, e.g. 2002). The number of years of MT-medium instruction is in their study (with over 200,000 children) even more important than socioeconomic status (see our discussion of ITM education and poverty, Section 5.1). Secondly, many among the other influencing factors are much more difficult and sometimes impossible to change, whereas changing the language of instruction IS possible. This is clear when comparing with some of the other factors, such as the children's age (older children are better than younger children in most aspects of learning), gender (girls are mostly better language learners than boys), socioeconomic status (middle class children do better in present-day schools than working class children), number of years in the new country for

immigrant minorities (the longer they have stayed, the better the children are doing in school), availability and standard of schools, classrooms, well-trained multilingual teachers, teaching materials, etc.

Debi would agree with all of this. But until recently, there have been too few empirical scientific studies about the results of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MLE). At the most, only two languages have been involved, as in the Thomas & Collier studies mentioned above. Even when children may have known more languages, these have not been drawn in at school, and very often only competence in the dominant language has been studied. And very few reported studies have originated in countries outside the West. Now this is slowly changing, and some of the most innovative and theoretically and empirically most interesting studies are emerging from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

A uniquely broad one, encompassing a whole country, comes from Ethiopia. Ethiopia has had an innovative and progressive national education policy, based on 8 years of mother-tongue medium (MTM) education, combined with teaching other languages (the national language, Amharic, and English) as subjects. Regions have the authority to make their own decentralized implementation plans. Some regions transfer to English medium already after 4 or 6 years. There is an efficient collection of system-wide assessment data. A study across all the regions was commissioned by the Ethiopian Ministry of Education (Heugh, Kathleen, Benson, Carol, Berhanu, Bogale & Mekonnen, Alemu Gebre Yohannes, 22 January 2007). The country-wide evaluation data show very clear patterns of learner achievement at Grade/Year 8, 10 and 12. The Grade 8 data show that those learners who have 8 years of MTM education plus English as a subject perform better across the curriculum (including in English) than those with 6 years or 4 years of mother tongue medium. The exception is the capital of Ethiopia where children hear and use English outside school and get slightly better results in English than rural children, despite fewer years of MTM education. The results are described and updated, and compared with several other countries, in articles in Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas 2010.

The large-scale experiments with MLE in Orissa and Andhra Pradesh are now starting to show results which are similar, even if the MTM education has not yet reached to higher grades. Even if the challenges are enormous, with poverty, lack of resources for teacher training and materials development etc, the first scientific evaluations of even 'ordinary' MLE show that children stay in school to a larger extent and their development is pointing in the right direction, as compared to tribal children in dominant (= regional) language medium education. And the special MLE Plus schools show even better results (see Mohanty, this volume).

To return to some of the claims about mother tongues, linguistic diversity, and so called modernisation, is it not true, then, that ties to local identity-building-blocks such as languages prevent people from partaking in the 'global' world?. This is another myth. In a fantastic book called *New World of Indigenous Resistance. Noam Chomsky and voices from North, South and Central America* (Meyer & Maldonado 2010), Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado criticizes Chomsky (and this critique would be even harsher in relation to some of the western researchers mentioned above) for holding

the erroneous view that *comunalidad* inevitably reduces or seeks to reduce itself to that which is local. Or even worse, that it excludes anything from the outside, or anything global, regardless of how valuable, useful and necessary it might be. This view holds that those who appreciate communal ways and fight to strengthen them want to isolate their people from the world, and lock themselves up in a nonexistent world free of evil ... Isolation or purism is not at all what the communalists have in mind. Rather, they focus on the need to equip their people to circulate in the world, confident in their identity and with a strong sense of belonging to their community. In other words, they strive to overcome the vulnerability and dependence generated by postmodern nomadism (Maldonado 2010: 368).

We agree totally. And mother tongues are mostly an important aspect of that strong identity. Still,

Mother tongues as concepts and claiming them is seen as ‘outmoded’ (Canagarajah 2005: 443), ‘irrelevant’, ‘quaint’ or ‘antedeluvian’ (May 2005: 321) and worse. By negating or ridiculing mother tongues as a concept these researchers may support the invisibilisation of ITM mother tongues in precisely those areas where the transfer of ITM languages to the next generations is decided, e.g. schools. At the same time, these non-nominalising myth-maker researchers often pose as (leftist and/or post-post-modern) advocates for Indigenous peoples and/or minorities (Skutnabb-Kangas 2009: 46).

Jodi Byrd, citizen of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, discusses the defamation of native voices in postcolonial scholarship, through casting Indigenous peoples as ‘relics or remnants of a distant, conquered past’ (2006: 83). She sees postcolonial theories as ‘situated on a precipice between providing a forum to consider the colonization of Indigenous People on a global, international scale and becoming yet another means through which Western academia discredits and invisibilizes indigenous world-views’ (ibid., 84). The theory ‘appears depoliticized in its emphasis on the “post” and its declaration that “the era of formal colonialism is over”’ (ibid., 86) whereas ‘the Native decolonial struggles in the USA are still ongoing’ (ibid.), with a federal policy that ‘systematically dismantles the sovereignty and treaty rights of Native nations, forcibly appropriates their lands, and degrades Native cultures and languages, through forced assimilation, relocation, and allotment’ (ibid.).

One can discern a similar policy towards ITMs in most parts of the world, with states and/or transnational companies forcibly appropriating ITM lands, and preventing the intergenerational transfer of their languages, helped by the partial legitimization of the forced assimilation by many researchers. Byrd pleads for a transformation of “the postcolonial to account for those processes through which the discursive colonialism of Native peoples remain intact even within theories developed to challenge Western hegemony” (ibid.).

Debi has in his work and writings been transformative in every sense of the word. The powerful insights that he brought to the academic world, which challenged Western orthodoxies, are now becoming mainstream worldwide. His profound, humane influence will live on.

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ⁱ One of Debi’s often quoted articles (in Skutnabb-Kangas & Cummins, eds, 1988) is called ‘Monolingual myopia and the petals of the Indian lotus: do many languages divide or unite a nation?’ We have heard many comments on the wonderful poetic title – so Indian... in fact, Jim Cummins and I (Tove) suggested the title, of course drawing on the content of the article. That was also one of Debi’s gifts to Tove: people remember images even when they might forget much of the content, and these images live and develop further. The water lily image that Tove, building on Debi, has written about for at least four decades in many articles and books, is still used by other people (e.g. Wink 2009).