



# Roy Harris and the liquidation of ‘languages’ in new sociolinguistics

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## ABSTRACT

New sociolinguistics is characterized by a liquidation of ‘languages’. Over the last two decades, socially interested critical scholars of language have reworked handed-down notions of individuate – ‘bounded’, ‘discrete’, ‘named’, ‘countable’– languages. A ‘language’ in new sociolinguistics is now commonly viewed as a second-order (language ideological) construct, rather than a first-order (self-contained) entity. In this article, we explore the intellectual roots and latter-day uptake of this critical idea, tracing it to the work of Roy Harris and its reception in sociolinguistics. We discuss the indirect uptake and hidden influence of Harris’ critique of linguistics, focusing on Makoni and Pennycook’s engagement with Harris, its impact on new sociolinguistics, and the relatively overt (bibliometric) absence of Harris in sociolinguistic and applied linguistic debates. We also expound Harris’ views on the relationship between linguistic ontology and the politics of language. In sum, this article contributes to a historicization and meta-theorization of new sociolinguistics, offering a reflexive point of view on one of its foundational ontological claims.

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## 1. New sociolinguistics and the disinvention of languages

Sociolinguistics has undergone a major epistemological renewal since the early 2000s. The circulation and metamorphosis of the term ‘new sociolinguistics’ over the last two decades attest to this development. In 2010, Jan Blommaert deployed the term to designate an ongoing process, writing of ‘the potential of a *new sociolinguistics* to offer new, perhaps better, answers to issues that hitherto were addressed under the banners of oppression and imperialism’ in sociolinguistic research on globalization (Blommaert, 2010: 27, our emphasis). Some ten years later, perceptive scholars viewed this ‘new sociolinguistics’ as a *fait accompli*, employing the term to denote an approach to sociolinguistic research so established that it warranted little explanation (e.g., Pennycook, 2018, 2024a; Jaspers, 2020).

Of course, the term ‘new sociolinguistics’ is neither new nor semantically fixed. It has been used to mark various epistemological shifts – conceivable, coveted, completed – throughout the relatively short history of sociolinguistics (e.g., Uberoi and Uberoi, 1976; Singh, 1996). At present, the term usually denotes a transdisciplinary turn, grounded in dialogues with linguistic anthropology, critical applied linguistics, social semiotics, as well as influences from various fields of, mostly, critical research in the humanities and social sciences.

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The epistemological orientation of new sociolinguistics is sprawling and eclectic. One of its central concerns pertains to the ontological status of individuate languages. The renewal of sociolinguistics has, arguably, been bolstered by a heightened interest among sociolinguists in the ontology of language. This interest is manifest in discussions of whether languages are first-order entities that exist independently of metalinguistic objectivation or whether they are social – discursive, meta-linguistic – constructs. New sociolinguistics gravitates towards the latter standpoint, rejecting earlier sociolinguistic – variationist and structural–functionalist – conceptions of individuate, but nonetheless socially determined, first-order languages. This rejection is, in turn, predicated on the idea that any conceptualization of languages as ‘fixed’ – discrete, bounded, named, countable – codes will misrecognize the social nature of language.

From the mid-2000s and onwards, a number of prominent sociolinguists espoused this critical standpoint, arguing that bounded and discrete languages are ideological fictions, the existence of which can never be teased apart from processes of discursive objectivation (see Makoni and Pennycook, 2005, 2007a; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Li and García, 2014). This idea was taken up broadly, both in sociolinguistics and its neighbouring fields (see Pennycook, 2016, 2024a; Jaspers and Madsen, 2019; Yan, 2022, 2026; Li et al., 2026). The mounting critique of linguistic reification was not tied to a clearly defined alternative paradigm. Rather, it cut across a number of different fields and lines of research, merging with a range of sociolinguistic interests and agendas. Clearing the way for new perspectives, questions, concepts, theories, and methods, it served to expand the remit and disciplinary boundaries of sociolinguistics.

The recent critique of fixed-code conceptualizations of language should be treated as a milestone in the history of sociolinguistics, contributing significantly to a thoroughgoing restructuring of the field. As such, it raises several questions. Why, to begin with, did a sociolinguistic critique of fixed codes arise? On what ideas did it draw? How and why did it catch on?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to historicize the proliferation in sociolinguistics of *the idea that language is not an object but a dynamic, free-flowing process*. This is what we aim to do in this article. Adding to a historiography of contemporary sociolinguistics, we take interest in the content and reception of two, partly overlapping, papers by Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook on the topic of *disinventing and reconstituting languages* (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005, 2007a). These papers had a decisive influence on the sociolinguistic critique of fixed-code conceptualizations of language. Here, Makoni and Pennycook laid out a programme for critically unpicking – ‘disinventing’ – dominant conceptions of language, aiming to clear the way for rethinking language in the contemporary world, for ‘reconstituting’ it along lines other than those of the episteme of western modernity. Makoni and Pennycook drew on a number of traditions, including postcolonial studies and critical historiographies of linguistic thought. A less obvious – and certainly less well-recognized – influence on their critique of language was Roy Harris’ identification of the so-called ‘determinacy fallacy’ or ‘fixed-code fallacy’ in linguistics (e.g., Harris, 1980, 1981, 1990a), which Makoni and Pennycook (2005, 2007a) adopted to their critique of linguistics.

Pennycook and Makoni’s two papers were circulated, read, and soon widely cited in sociolinguistics and adjacent fields. As a result of the reception, Harris’ rejection of the idea of fixed codes gained a firm foothold in these fields, where it provided a renewed critical outlook on one of the core objects of sociolinguistics. This suggestion may at first seem puzzling, as Harris was never a household name in sociolinguistics. Citations of Harris are relatively rare in sociolinguistics, and comparatively few sociolinguists have engaged in depth with Harris’ thinking (see appendix 1). This absence, however, is only superficial. As our historicization of the new sociolinguistic rejection of reified languages will indicate, Harris’ critique of the fixed-code fallacy has impacted heavily on new sociolinguistics through Makoni and Pennycook’s mediating work. The recent sociolinguistic rejection of the construal of language as fixed codes is grounded in a selective reading of Makoni and Pennycook’s adaptation of Harrisian doctrine, which possibly has increased the attractiveness and usability of Harris’ ideas.

## 2. Makoni and Pennycook’s reading of Harris

Harris was one among several sources of inspiration for Makoni and Pennycook’s critique of language. They grounded their programme of disinventing and reconstituting languages in an array of scholarly traditions, citing works in various strands of anthropology, critical theory, historiography, linguistics, and philosophy. Despite this eclecticism, it is nevertheless clear that they developed their rejection of fixed codes in dialogue with Harris’ critique of linguistics. The influence from Harris was duly acknowledged. In the first article on the disinvention and reconstitution of language, Makoni and Pennycook (2005) noted that ‘the construction of language as an autonomous object’ had been challenged by ‘the integrational linguistics of Harris (1980, 1981, 1998)’ (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005: 145), attributing to Harris the idea that ‘orthodox linguistics’ had

profoundly misconstrued language through its myths about the autonomy, systematicity and rule bound nature of language, its privileging of supposedly expert, scientific linguistic knowledge over everyday understandings of language (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005: 146).

Expanding on Harris’ critique, Makoni and Pennycook stressed that Harris had already called into question ‘whether the concept of “a language” as defined by orthodox modern linguistics, corresponds to any determinate or determinable object of analysis at all, whether social or individual’ (Harris, 1990a: 45, quoted in Makoni and Pennycook, 2005: 146). ‘If there is no such object’, their quotation from Harris continued, ‘it is difficult to evade the conclusion that modern linguistics has been

based upon a myth' (ibid.). And if the notion of fixed code was little more than 'a myth', Makoni and Pennycook concurred with Harris, 'linguistics does not need to postulate the existence of languages as part of its theoretical apparatus' (ibid.). These quotes from Harris (1990a) reappeared in the chapter by Makoni and Pennycook (2007a) that opened their 2007 edited volume *Disinventing and (Re)constituting Languages* (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007b).

Makoni and Pennycook's reading of Harris differs little between the 2005 article and the 2007 book chapter. Both texts invoked Harris' critique of the fixed-code fallacy in linguistics to break with engrained conceptualizations of language as a set of bounded, discrete, and named entities. This endorsement of Harris' critique of linguistic orthodoxy was grounded in Harris' essay *On redefining linguistics* (Harris, 1990a). For Harris however, the 'determinacy fallacy' was only one of the cardinal errors of linguistics. In linguistics, Harris argued, the construal of languages as fixed codes dovetailed with a so-called 'telementational fallacy', that is, a dogmatic belief in the idea that these fixed codes serve to transfer thoughts from one mind to another. Taken together, Harris posits, these two fallacies jointly form the basis of the language myth, the foundational doxa of most known forms of linguistic thought (see Harris, 1980, 1981).

Harris' critique of linguistics went beyond his rejection of the language myth. It encompassed critical engagements with various strands of linguistic thought and philosophy (see Harris, 1988, 1996, 2001, 2009) and connected more broadly to his work on writing, semiology, and the history of linguistic thought. These lines of research impacted little on Makoni and Pennycook's discussion of Harris (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005, 2007a). Although Makoni and Pennycook (2005, 2007a) restated Harris' suggestion that a 'redefined' linguistics should dispense with notions of arbitrariness, linearity, and determinate meaning (e.g., Harris, 1990a, cited in Makoni and Pennycook, 2005, 2007a), they did not at this point engage further with Harris' integrationist challenge to linguistic orthodoxy. Their rejection of fixed-code theories pertained mainly to the idea that languages have no independent existence but are, rather, mythical artefacts imagined by self-proclaimed linguistic experts.

This reading of Harris was tailored to Makoni and Pennycook's main argument. In their two papers, Makoni and Pennycook explained that the purpose of rejecting languages as pre-given, autonomous, first-order entities was to develop a better understanding of the ways in which languages were socially 'produced, regulated and constituted' (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005: 140) – 'invented', as it were – and how these modes of production and regulation interrelated with politics. They stressed the necessity of considering practices of language invention in relation to 1) colonialism, 2) the 'metadiscursive regimes' of western modernity, and 3) the political and social effects of language invention. The history of colonialism, Makoni and Pennycook noted, is rife with examples of language invention. Citing G. A. Grierson's *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson, 1903–1928), they posited that colonial practices of linguistic description not merely invented names for pre-existing languages (as Grierson willingly admitted), but that these practices effectively brought languages into being as distinct – named, bounded, countable – social forms. Linguistic description, in this view, was a practice of invention, converting unmoored speech practices into reified languages.

Although this idea certainly aligned with Harris' critique of the fixed-code fallacy, Makoni and Pennycook developed it with reference to the concept of 'metadiscursive regimes', drawing on Bauman and Briggs' critical historiography of anthropological linguistic thought (Bauman and Briggs, 2003). Metadiscursive regimes, following Bauman and Briggs' reading of Foucault and Latour, are schemas of perception, classification, and narration, which serve as ideological and institutional frameworks for delineating, ordering, and governing languages, linguistic practices, and speakers. Linguistics, Makoni and Pennycook contend, operates within such regimes, functioning as an epistemological pivot and as a source of legitimacy for practices of language invention. Yet for Makoni and Pennycook, neither practices of language invention nor the metadiscursive regimes of which such practices formed part were confined to the specialized field of academic linguistics. Rather, they permeated society at large. The invention and regulation of languages, Makoni and Pennycook emphasized, 'have had very real and material effects' on 'how language policies have been constructed, how education has been pursued, how people have come to identify with particular linguistic labels' (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005: 138).

A core task of their programme of disinvention was, accordingly, to grasp the interdependence of language invention, modes of regulation ('metadiscursive regimes'), and colonial history, together with the societal effects of dominant visions of bounded and discrete languages. A critical grasp of this nexus of knowledge and power would then serve as the basis for undoing – disinventing, as it were – the 'dominant understanding of language', opening up new ways of 'rethinking language in the contemporary world' (Makoni and Pennycook, 2005, 2007a). Strategies of disinvention and reconstitution, Makoni and Pennycook contended, could help to free linguistics from its stale, lofty, and often destructive theories and models of language and social life, offering better – more grounded, less top-down – tools for grasping language, communication, and sociolinguistic practice.

### 3. The impact of disinvention

Makoni and Pennycook's idea of disinvention quickly caught on. It was, for instance, noted by Chris Stroud (2007), who referred to it in his contribution to Monica Heller's edited volume *Bilingualism: A Social Approach* (Heller, 2007). Here Stroud argued that 'indigenous languages were invented in forms imagined by the colonial linguist, rather than in ways that rang true to the variety of local speech practices encountered by colonial linguistics' (Stroud, 2007: 26ff), citing Makoni and Pennycook (2007a) as 'forthcoming', thus flagging his prior knowledge of their work. Stroud had written a blurb for Makoni and Pennycook's 2007 edited volume, praising the work as 'essential reading' for anyone who sought to wed 'a socially responsible applied linguistics' to 'a sophisticated discourse on the nature of language' (Stroud, back cover of Makoni and

Pennycook, 2007b). Indeed, Stroud was certainly correct in his anticipation of the impact that Makoni and Pennycook's collaborative work would have on sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

Another advocate of *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages* (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007b) would prove instrumental to this development: Ofelia García. In her preface to the volume, she hailed the disinvention of languages as a 'key question', which 'must surround' all 'thinking about bilingual education in the future' (García, 2007: xiii). 'What would language education look like', García asked, 'if we no longer posited the existence of languages' (ibid.). Makoni and Pennycook's critique of linguistics appears to have made García revise her views on the ontology of language, spurring her to commit wholeheartedly to the idea that languages do not exist.

Prior to the publication of Pennycook and Makoni's edited volume in 2007, a critical questioning of the reality of individuate languages had not been a central theme in García's writings on language and education. It is revealing that García's co-authored opening chapter in a 2006 edited volume contains uncritical references to 'native tongues' and 'ethnolinguistic groups', as well as 'enumerative' accounts of multilingualism, such as tables of 'living languages with at least one first language speaker' (see García et al., 2006), hinting at García's grounding in the Fishmanian tradition (see also García and Fishman, 1997; García, 1991, 2000). Following her encounter with Makoni and Pennycook's texts on disinvention and reconstitution, García abandoned the idea that languages were fixed, discrete and countable entities. As García admitted in her preface to *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages* (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007b) volume, disinvention was an immensely transformative idea which had left her 'questioning some of [her] "venerable" assumptions about language and education or language and minority rights' (García, 2007: xiv).

Towards the end of the 2000s, García had become heavily invested in the idea of disinvention, lacing her work with references to Makoni and Pennycook (e.g., García, 2009a, 2009b). Her book *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century* (García, 2009a) included a section on 'language constructions' in which García argued that 'our present conception of language was originally constructed by states to consolidate political power' and that description, standardization, and enumeration were 'efforts to control language' (García, 2009a: 23), citing Makoni and Pennycook (2007a, 2007b) as the source of these ideas, not mentioning their Harrisian roots. Languages, in García's view, were neither autonomous nor natural entities, but institutional artefacts created by the regimenting practices of language experts, educational institutions, and other agents of clerical and state power. García (2009a) maintained that such processes of construction had abstracted away language from the 'truly social' dynamics of everyday interaction (García, 2009a: 23–25). The construction of language resembled a mode of ideological dissociation rather than, as one may have suspected, a form of language political *Ausbau* in the technocratic vein of Fishman or Kloss (see Hutton, 2022).

García's uptake of Makoni and Pennycook was closely connected to her work of developing a new theory of multilingualism. As a theoretical alternative to reified languages and linguistic borders, García endorsed the concept of *translanguaging*, originally conceived by Welsh poet and educationalist Cen Williams. Drawing on Baker (2001), García (2009a) stressed that the concept represented a decisive break with notions of fixed codes and reified languages. Translanguaging, García posited, is 'not about code-switching, but rather about an arrangement that normalizes bilingualism without diglossic functional separation' (García et al., 2007: 219). Translanguaging, on this account, was at once a linguistic phenomenon, a viewpoint on multilingualism, and a pedagogical strategy (see García and Sylvan, 2011; García and Li, 2014, 2022). Starting the late 2000s, García would develop these ideas in a wealth of publications, which attracted a global following in educational and applied linguistics.

This was not an isolated case of impact. García and her colleagues were not the only language scholars who incorporated into their research Makoni and Pennycook's Harrisian critique of fixed-code conceptualizations of language. In his two-volume opus *Languaging*, Jens Normann Jørgensen dismissed the concept of bounded languages as an ideological fiction, in relation to which prescriptive norms were devised and 'aggressively upheld' (Jørgensen, 2008: 182). In a multilingual nation-state like Denmark, Jørgensen asserted, the idea of fixed and discrete languages failed to capture the 'polylingual' – fluid and dynamic – languaging of children and adolescents in linguistically heterogenous urban neighbourhoods. Tracing the linguistic practices of students in a Copenhagen primary school for nine years, Jørgensen had come to espouse the idea that bounded and discrete languages were chimeras, as linguistic 'features' were moving freely across imagined linguistic borders. 'The nature of language', Jørgensen insisted, is 'languaging' not 'separate languages' (Jørgensen, 2008: 181–185).

It should come as no surprise that Jørgensen commented approvingly on Makoni and Pennycook's vision of disinvention, crediting their 2007 chapter for the suggestion that languages 'are ideological constructs which were invented in Europe' (Jørgensen, 2008: 35) and subsequently 'brought to particularly Africa and South Asia with colonialism [as] the colonizer forced the concept [of discrete, bounded languages] onto the colonized' (Jørgensen, 2008: 38). However, Jørgensen did not go as far as to endorse Makoni and Pennycook's vision of reconstitution. The disinvention of languages was for Jørgensen primarily a corrective for sociolinguistics, as it underscored the necessity to ground sociolinguistic 'descriptions of language' in a 'focus on features' rather than codes or languages (Jørgensen, 2008: 181). Jørgensen had little hope that this theoretical reconceptualization of 'languages' as 'languaging' and 'features' would gain traction beyond academic linguistics:

Once the notion of languages as entities which can be neatly separated and distinguished between was launched and spread, there was no way back. The ideological strength of this notion is so strong that it is almost impossible to challenge, for instance among decision makers, education planners, gatekeepers, etc. throughout the modern world. We must take account of the fact that people, the language users, think of features as belonging to sets of features, and they call these sets of features languages (Jørgensen, 2008: 38)

Just like García, Jørgensen cited Makoni and Pennycook (2007a) without any reference to Harris. Similar omissions were made by several other influential sociolinguists who drew on Makoni and Pennycook's idea of disinvention. In *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*, Jan Blommaert (2010: 4) proposed that 'modern sociolinguistics' had inherited an 'artefactualized image of language' from modern linguistics, and accordingly construed any 'language as a bounded, nameable and countable unit, often reduced to grammatical structures and vocabulary and called by names such as "English", "French" and so on', citing Makoni and Pennycook as one source of this idea, along with Bauman and Briggs (2003), Silverstein (1998), and himself (Blommaert, 2006). Tellingly, he neither picked up on Makoni and Pennycook's ideas about radically reconstituting languages, nor on the influence of Harris' on their critique of language.

In a position paper co-authored with Ben Rampton published in the following year, Blommaert noted that there now existed

a substantial body of work on ideologies of language that denaturalizes the idea that there are distinct languages, and that a proper language is bounded, pure and composed of structured sounds, grammar and vocabulary designed for referring to things' (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011: 3ff)

While Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 4) cited Makoni and Pennycook (2007a) along with various standard references, they made no mention of Harris' critique of the fixed-code fallacy.

Such citational gaps are pervasive in sociolinguistic scholarship. While Makoni and Pennycook (2005, 2007a, 2007b) are frequently cited to bring home the point that named languages are social fictions or constructs, the intellectual roots and ramifications of their programme of disinvention have typically been overlooked (see Creese and Blackledge, 2010; García and Li, 2014; Rosa and Flores, 2017). References to Harris are only rarely included in sociolinguistic discussions of Makoni and Pennycook's work. Citations of Makoni and Pennycook (2005, 2007a, 2007b) are typically not co-cited with citations of Harris' work (for details, see Appendix 1). Although this citational practice indicates that Makoni and Pennycook's papers on disinvention may have become a go-to reference in critical discussions of the ontology of language, it also underscores that Harris' indirect contribution was rendered invisible by the disinclination of critical linguists to engage with Makoni and Pennycook's sources of inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite the relative absence of references to Harris in sociolinguistic discourse, Harrisian ideas remain present in the collective consciousness of new sociolinguistics. To be sure, Harris' critique of the fixed-code fallacy has spread silently, influencing new sociolinguistics in its formative phase without becoming widely noted.

Makoni and Pennycook were nevertheless explicit about their reading and reuse of Harris' critique of linguistics, occasionally pushing back at sociolinguists' lacking interest in some Harrisian standpoints (see Makoni, 2011, 2012a; Pennycook, 2024a). Notwithstanding the general sociolinguistic unawareness of the intellectual origins of the concept of disinvention, they continued to discuss Harris' ideas. In *Language as a Local Practice*, Pennycook (2010) returned to his earlier engagement with Harris, commenting on Harris' rejection of the fixed-code fallacy. Deepening this engagement, Pennycook discussed Harris' interest in 'lay-perspectives' on language and communication, framing such perspectives as forms of 'local knowledge' which linguistics ought to take seriously. This reading of Harris' concern with the 'lay-person' aligned well with Pennycook's (2010) discussion of 'local practice' and 'local knowledge about language'. A sensitization to lay ideas, Pennycook (2010: 82) could help sociolinguistics to develop critical reflexivity around its epistemological aloofness, manifested, for example, in its reliance on 'enumerative strategies' for grasping multilingualism:

While opening up questions of diversity with one hand, at the same time such [enumerative] strategies also reproduce the tropes of colonial invention, overlooking the contested history of language inventions, and ignoring the collateral damage that their embedded notions of language may be perpetrating. By rendering diversity a quantitative question of language enumeration, such approaches continue to employ the census strategies of colonialism while missing the qualitative question of where diversity lies (Pennycook, 2010: 82)

Regardless of Pennycook's intention, this passage gestures at the lack of interest among critical linguists in the idea of reconstitution. Whereas Makoni and Pennycook's critique of fixed-code theories and their doubts regarding quantitative – 'enumerating' – approaches to linguistic diversity were catching on in the field, their suggestion that languages ought to be reconstituted in relation to 'lay', 'local', or 'grassroots' perspectives was not taken up at a similar pace.

Makoni (2012a) was more vocal about his qualms about sociolinguists' slight interest in the idea of reconstitution. The critique of 'named languages' and 'fixed codes' that were gaining a foothold in (new) sociolinguistics would not necessarily result in alternative ideas Makoni suggested, noting that even theoretical linguists like Noam Chomsky and analytical philosophers like Donald Davidson had fielded critiques of named languages (Makoni, 2012a: 189). Thus downplaying the imagined radicalism of sociolinguistics' rejection of reified languages, Makoni maintained that a commitment to the idea that 'languages are not natural objects' (Makoni, 2012a: 190) was *in itself insufficient* for breaking with orthodox linguistic thought. Such a disruption, Makoni (2012a) insisted, would also require work around the idea of reconstitution. Although sociolinguistics, in Makoni's view, was animated by 'a strong impulse to move beyond the notion of codes', this impulse had at the same time given rise to 'a powerful counterforce that restates the characteristics of codes' (Makoni, 2012a: 194). This paradoxical dialectic between renewal and tradition was most tangible in sociolinguistics' 'search for a metalanguage that

<sup>1</sup> See table 1 (appendix) for bibliometric details.

goes beyond orthodox linguistic terms', as this search enthusiastically reiterated several foundational beliefs of orthodox linguistics (Makoni, 2012a).

Bringing home this point, Makoni noted that although many 'alternative' – supposedly code-defying – theories of language had recently been formulated, none of these theories had freed themselves from the metalinguistic devices characteristic of academic linguistics. Concepts like *linguaging*, *translanguaging*, *polylinguaging*, *polylingual languaging*, *supervernaculars*, *contemporary urban vernaculars*, and the like, Makoni insisted, were ultimately metalinguistic labels, and in this regard no different from a term like 'language' or 'code'. 'From an integrationist perspective', Makoni (2012a: 196) underscored, such metalinguistic manoeuvres would always remain second-order rationalizations of an evasive first-order. A new metalanguage would never succeed to resolve the problem of scholarly metalinguistic objectivation, only extend it in a transmutable series of mystifying abstractions.

For Makoni (2012a: 191–192), sociolinguistics' uptake of the critique of fixed codes had resulted in 'totalistic interpretations of languaging', 'deterministic frameworks of language and communication' or reassertions of 'the idea of a code'. The disinvention of languages had not yet cleared the way for the project of reconstitution. The issue here lay not with the conceptual accuracy of scholarly metalanguages, but with views, ideas and experiences of that were excluded these metalanguages. If sociolinguistics would not take seriously alternative – non-scholarly – views of language and communication, it would never truly reconstitute its linguistic doctrines. It is telling that, although Makoni and Pennycook continued to raise this point (e.g., Makoni, 2011; Makoni and Pennycook, 2012; Pennycook, 2016, 2024a), cautioning that the new sociolinguistic concepts could easily be fused with received doctrines, thus 'rendering them equally susceptible to normative conceptualizations' of language, communication and social relations (Pennycook, 2016: 210).

Sociolinguists were not entirely unresponsive to these challenges. A growing interest in linguistic ideas, language ideologies, the politics of linguistic scholarship, and the like was another vector in the epistemological reformation of sociolinguistics. Despite this orientation, however, the sociolinguistic uptake of disinvention coincided only occasionally with critical reflexivity around the ongoing efforts to retool the discipline. More often such critical efforts concentrated on the epistemic fallacies, failed concepts, and unfashionable theories from sociolinguistics' recent past. New concepts and ideas, as Pennycook (2016) and Jaspers (2018) recognized, were typically not subject to critical scrutiny. The uptake in sociolinguistics of Makoni and Pennycook, (2005, 2007a) was, in this regard, arguably selective. The critique of fixed codes and reified languages, as Angel Lin (2013: 522) noted, had mainly served to expand sociolinguistics' conceptual apparatus with an 'array of different but related notions such as metrolinguism, flexible bilingualism, translanguaging, and hybrid language practice.' Yet from a Harrisian viewpoint, as Makoni (2012a) and Pennycook (2016) indicated, it was nevertheless questionable whether these new theoretical constructs resonated with the ideas and experiences of non-academic sign-makers (see also Orman, 2012; Orman and Plabé, 2016).

#### 4. Mounting conflicts and the politics of disinvention

The indirect impact on new sociolinguistics of the Harrisian critique of fixed codes and bounded, discrete languages cannot be underestimated. It served as a precondition for the wave of theoretical innovation that swept through the field from the late 2000s and onward, offering a much-needed epistemological break with earlier form-centred approaches to language and social life. The force of this impact is, however, not only expressed in the widespread rejection of notions of fixed code, nor in the proliferation of new concepts and theories. It is also manifested in critical responses to this recent reorientation of sociolinguistics. Although it would be inaccurate to speak of a backlash against the critical ethos of new sociolinguistics, the new critique of fixed-code theories has recently drawn flak.

Pennycook (2024a: 70) uses the term 'translanguaging battles' as a label for this turn of events, calling attention to critiques of the idea of disinvention by applied and educational linguists such as Jeff MacSwan (2020, 2022a), and Bhatt and Bolonyai, 2022. This term could easily be extended to cover other critical interventions, including the polemics of Peter Auer (2022) and, more recently, Jeanine Treffers-Daller (2025), as well as commentaries by various other, hyphenated and unhyphenated, linguists (e.g., papers in MacSwan, 2022b; contributions in Flores and Snape, 2025). A central issue in these debates is, once again, the ontological status of languages. Linguists who push back at the idea of disinvention or dismiss sociolinguistic rejections of fixed-code conceptualizations of language often mobilize ontological arguments to drive home their point, stressing that languages 'exist' prior to metalinguistic objectivation (as first-order objects). Moreover, the rhetoric drummed up by more traditional linguistics against the idea of disinvention involves – as one would expect – charges of 'evidence-free assertions' (Cummins, 2025), 'postmodernism' (MacSwan, 2022a), 'unnecessary polarization' (Treffers-Daller, 2025), and the like (see also Pennycook, 2024a; Flores and Snape, 2025). For these counter-critics, the project of disinvention is an epistemologically unjustified undertaking, running counter both to the order of nature and the scientific mission of linguistics.

Makoni and Pennycook's work features prominently as a 'postmodernist' foil in many of these critiques. For instance MacSwan (2020, 2022a), who counts among the more vociferous critics of the rejection of fixed codes, has insisted that Makoni and, especially, Pennycook are to blame for the 'postmodern', 'deconstructivist' ideas that supposedly have wreaked havoc in applied and sociolinguistics. Interestingly, MacSwan attempts to bring home this point in a 'brief history of translanguaging theory' (MacSwan and Rolstad, 2024) in which he nevertheless fails to analyse the immediate sources of Makoni and Pennycook's ideas about disinvention and reconstitution. Rather than examining Makoni and Pennycook's engagement with postcolonial theory, the historiography of anthropological linguistics, integrationism, and the politics of

languages and linguistics, MacSwan sweepingly dismisses their work as a form of 'deconstructivism in the broader context of postmodernism', wrongly connecting it to the work of Derrida (for a response see Pennycook, 2024a). As a consequence, MacSwan has failed to grasp not only the affinities between Harris and Makoni and Pennycook, but also Harris' critique of the linguistic ideas of many French theorists, including Derrida (e.g., Harris, 2001).

MacSwan's historiographic lapses are awkward. Nevertheless, they bear witness to Harris's hidden impact on sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and related fields. It is revealing that current attacks on sociolinguistic appropriations of Harris' critique of fixed-code theories are never formulated as, say, charges of integrationist sectarianism. Accusations of intellectual nihilism similar to those directed at Harris from the 1980s and onward (see Hutton, 2016) are presently levelled at scholars like Pennycook, Makoni, and García. Yet, these attacks contain virtually no references to Harris (see MacSwan, 2020, 2022a; MacSwan and Rolstad, 2024; papers in MacSwan, 2022b; contributions in Flores and Snape, 2025). The lack of interest in the recent history of linguistics has decoupled both appraisals and rejections of the Harrisian critique of fixed-code theories from its historical roots. Paradoxically, this too is a sign of Harris' impact.

## 5. Concluding discussion

The rejection of fixed-code theories in new sociolinguistics is rooted in Harris' critique of linguistics. Sociolinguists' current unease with the individuate – discrete, bounded, named, countable – languages is predicated on the sociolinguistic uptake of Harris' rejection of fixed-codes and first-order determinacy. This uptake was tacit and indirect. It materialized through the mediational work of Makoni and Pennycook (2005, 2007a), resulting in a substantial, yet subtle, impact of Harris on the ontologies of language embraced by new sociolinguistics. The positive reception of Makoni and Pennycook's work on disinvention resulted in an unknowing, ahistorical acceptance of Harris' thinking among socially invested scholars of language. Although Makoni and Pennycook (2005, 2007a) explained in detail their reading of Harris' critique of linguistics, few of the scholars who rallied behind their notion of disinvention took explicit interest in the Harrisian roots of this notion. First-hand engagements with Harris' work remain relatively rare in sociolinguistics, critical applied linguistics, and related fields (see table 1). While both Makoni and Pennycook have continued to engage with Harris' work (see Makoni 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Makoni et al., 2021; Makoni and Severo, 2022; Makoni and Pablé, 2022; Pennycook, 2010, 2018, 2024a, 2024b), few sociolinguists have followed their example. Makoni and Pennycook's calls for a critical historicization of linguistic thought (e.g., Makoni and Pennycook, 2005, 2007a, 2012) have largely remained unanswered.

The indirect uptake in sociolinguistics of Harris' critique of the fixed-code fallacy has been selective, possibly as a result of new sociolinguistics' scant interest to go *ad fontes*. One major difference between Harris' critical project and the sociolinguistic disinvention of fixed codes lies in the assumed relation between first-order fluidity and second-order politics. It is revealing that a notion like translanguaging is widely perceived as compatible with directive interventions and top-down pedagogies, setting itself against monolingualism as an essentialist, oppressive ideology. In the current translanguaging debates, the relationship of the idea of disinvention to questions of social justice is a point of contention, framed as 'a serious political cause' by Pennycook (2024b) and as a 'purely ideological' one by MacSwan (MacSwan and Rolstad, 2024). Despite of their differences however, each side in the battle appears to assume that a 'correct' linguistic ontology is a prerequisite for correct political action, both with regard to linguistic matters and more generally. The idea of *getting language right* is key, regardless of whether one defends linguistic fluidity or linguistic fixity.

Ironically, this shared doxa reasserts the position of the linguist as an expert outsider, whose visions of language, social life, and political action may potentially run against the aspirations of marginalized communities. Expert doctrines of language, regardless of what these doctrines are, may not always – if ever – align fully with lay ideas. As a result of this dissonance, the political relevance, efficacy, and risks of *any* theory of language can never be fully nor universally predictable. The real-world implications of any expert theory of language are indeed determined by highly contingent historical, social, and political factors. The political impact of *any* linguistic idea is not inferable from the idea alone. While it is clear that the rejection of conceptualizations of language as fixed codes destabilizes modernist projects of social and linguistic engineering (in the spirit of Kloss or Fishman), the political value of alternative theoretical stances remains subject to intense debates (see Pennycook, 2024a, 2024b; MacSwan and Rolstad, 2024; articles in Flores and Snape, 2025).

These debates are currently waged at the interface of linguistic theory (or more specifically: linguistic ontology), metatheory, and language politics, centring around various foundational questions in sociolinguistics, such as: What theory of language accurately captures the social and linguistic being of an individual? Should socially invested scholars of language – applied, educational, and sociolinguists – hold on to handed-down theoretical notions and inherited metalinguistic labels? Should they invent new ones? For whom and on what grounds? To what extent should they play ball with the established institutional order? To what extent should they challenge it? How should they square their theories with political realities and institutional demands?

These concerns are voiced in relation to new sociolinguistic concerns. Nevertheless, they remain bound by the vernacularism of a previous generation of sociolinguistics, seeking to capture and validate the authentic self-expression of common folks, even if this task is now increasingly understood through notions such as translanguaging, rather than language, mother tongue, or dialect. But just like these older notions, the new theoretical concepts of sociolinguistics cannot be straightforwardly translated into a coherent model at any level of policy. Such a translation will not only require a practical negotiation between law, politics, institutions, and stakeholders, but will likely result in a conceptual

simplification and administrative fixation of the original concepts. When subsumed under an institutional order, even the messiest and most dynamic ideas grow rigid and stale.

It goes without saying that any metalanguage – scholarly or not – amounts to reification. For Harris and other integrationists, the way forward must accordingly proceed by rejecting the very idea of linguistic expertise, opening up for a dialogue with laypeople on linguistic issues (Harris, 1990b). While Pennycook (2024a) endorses this approach as a form of ‘ontological curiosity’, capable of making linguistics more attuned to everyday ideas, Harris rather sees the liquidation of the belief in academic linguistic expertise as a move towards abandoning linguistics altogether (see Harris, 1981, 1987, 1990b). Such suggestions are rarely heard in sociolinguistics.

A profoundly antinomian stance lay at the root of Harris’ thinking. Rejecting both modernist and poststructuralist approaches to the politics of language, Harris did not run along the rails of academic progressivism (Cameron, 2012: 27–30; Hutton, 2016). In works such as *The Language Machine* (1987), Harris evoked the socially destructive effects of uncritical subordination to language as an impersonal system. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), he argued that local society should take agency over English and no longer treat it as a foreign colonial imposition (Harris 1989: 45–46):

The language a community uses must be its own; and communities, like individuals, have the ability to make a language their own. For communities, like individuals, are not just language users: they are language makers. New English or Old English, if Hong Kong wants English it must make it its own. Otherwise it will surely lose it.

In 1990, Harris and Mimi Chan co-edited a volume entitled *Asian Voices in English*, comprising papers from a symposium at HKU (Chan and Harris 1990). The editors’ introduction ended as follows: ‘In keeping with the spirit of the symposium, the Editors and Publishers have refrained from imposing any standardization on contributors’ orthography. Those who are free to speak their own English must also be free to write their own English’ (Chan and Harris, 1990: 2). In the same volume, Harris wrote of Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* that ‘the English of his novel is not something fortuitously left over from a colonial past: it is consciously reclaimed linguistic territory’ (Harris, 1990c: 93).

Ultimately, Harris’ fundamental philosophical or semiological concern lay with the nature of individual and societal creativity and agency, aligning with a classic liberal cause such as freedom of speech, rather than with institutional provisions for language rights, a progressive politics of identity, or a search for a post-capitalist, post-colonial social order. For Harris, there was no direct link between first-order indeterminacy and higher order politics. This standpoint has not been taken up in sociolinguistics, old or new.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**David Karlander:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Christopher M. Hutton:** Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Appendix. Co-citations of Harris in works citing Makoni and Pennycook

Co-citations of Roy Harris in publications citing Makoni and Pennycook on disinvention (i.e. Makoni and Pennycook, 2005; Pennycook and Makoni, 2007) are summarized in table 1.

**Table 1**

Co-citations of any work by Roy Harris in publications citing Makoni and Pennycook’s early works on disinvention (per 27 October 2025)

| Publication                  | Citations | Co-citing Harris | %    | Source         |
|------------------------------|-----------|------------------|------|----------------|
| Makoni and Pennycook (2005)  | 120       | 5                | 4,17 | Scopus         |
| Makoni and Pennycook (2005)  | 613       | 28               | 4,57 | Google scholar |
| Makoni and Pennycook (2007b) | 3009      | 138              | 4,59 | Google scholar |

Although the figures from Google Scholar should be treated with some caution, table 1 substantiates the impression that discussions of Roy Harris’ work have largely been absent from sociolinguistics and its neighbouring fields. Counted citations include self-citations and exclude doublets.

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