

Presentation at *Presentación del Centro de Investigación  
en Multilingüismo, Discurso y Comunicación (MIRCo),*  
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 25/11/21

## **The MIRCo Research Centre Multilingualism, Discourse & Communication**

**LUISA MARTÍN ROJO – MIRCo Director**

The Centre for Research in Multilingualism, Discourse and Communication (MIRCo) was created to provide a meeting space for researchers, enabling them to consider cultural and linguistic diversity, discourse and intercultural communication, in terms of social processes such as inequality or social exclusion, together with the policies and practices (including those with a nationalist or neoliberal bias) with which these processes are addressed in society.

For 20 years, our research group has confronted and resisted neoliberal demands, transforming itself and adapting to changing circumstances. Chief among these demands is the call for our research endeavours to be profitable, notwithstanding the isolation imposed by the lack of resources with which to consolidate research teams, and the competitiveness and individualism promoted by the cognitive capitalism of the JCRs. We have successfully balanced these conflicting goals, but we continue to believe that transcendent, creative and relevant research is best conducted within spaces for collective reflection, in which resources are shared and synergies constructed.

The MIRCo Centre arose from our reflections on this process. We now intend to consolidate, expand and reinforce the trajectory undertaken.

What exactly is a research centre, and what is its purpose? The answers to these questions are not immediately apparent. In principle, a research centre, as opposed to a research group, provides greater visibility and institutional presence for the projects addressed, and plays a dynamic role in scientific output, in training-oriented initiatives and in dealings with society in general. A centre also has greater autonomy and is often better placed to attract resources. Making good use of this autonomy, the MIRCo Centre has established itself as a space for meeting, dialogue and collaboration in which networks of specialists from a wide range of disciplines such as linguistics, communication science, social anthropology and psychology, political science, sociology and biology, can converge to develop cutting-edge research into multilingualism, discourse and communication, with particular attention to the communicative, social, political, economic, cultural, identity and educational aspects of these fields.

Many of us, who are part of the Council or are researchers at the MIRCo center, are gathered here today in this room at the Círculo de Bellas Artes or via YouTube. The MIRCo website provides detailed information about us and about the Centre.

**What do our activities consist of and how important are they?**

Our work takes place at the frontiers of knowledge, where we investigate, highlight and intervene in areas that are undergoing change and about which there are sometimes conventional views, which we challenge. Self-evidently, in today's society the main areas of attention and activity for MIRCo – multilingualism, discourse and communication – are not only highly significant but are being transformed in radical new ways.

- **Languages are no longer what they were.** Social, demographic, economic and cultural processes such as globalisation, outsourcing, increased mobility and the expansion of neoliberalism have accentuated the role of languages within the economic system, promoting their commercialisation and commodification. Language is no longer viewed as merely a tool for communication and understanding, but it has also become the capital that allows us to "reach our goals", to get "access" and "participate" in contexts that may be termed multilingual, but do not fully merit this description. As a result, multilingualism is often remarked and celebrated: trilingual schools are created, babies are encouraged to be multilingual from the cradle, and families and institutions make heavy investments in language teaching and certification programmes. However, the aim of all this is often not for individuals to learn languages and thus communicate better, but to enable them to compete more strongly. Nevertheless, and as MIRCo research has often shown, the effects of this commodification of languages are, to say the least, disturbing: in practice, those who have more personal resources thus acquire more still. Multilingualism, by itself, guarantees neither diversity nor greater social equality, since it rarely reinforces the languages of the periphery or those of the global South, such as Mapuzugun. All emphasis, rather, is placed on dominant languages such as English.
- **Discourse is in the eye of the hurricane.** We no longer consider discourse as a reflection of reality. Instead, it is seen as a constructor of this reality and we have ended up fearing their power to generate social falsehood and social alarm. Pitched cultural battles, denialism and hate speech, together with the role played by social networks in their production and circulation, reveal the power of discursive mechanisms. As discourse analysts we have contributed to develop and circulate knowledge about these mechanisms, which is now being used by some for purposes that we reject. In response, MIRCo works to strengthen and expand the circulation of counter-arguments such as feminist, decolonising and anti-racist discourses.
- **Communication is being invented every day.** The COVID pandemic has presented us with a very immediate form of communication which as well as being intercultural and multilingual, is also hybrid. We may communicate face-to-face, but this act can also be recorded and others will see it, either immediately or later, anywhere in the world, in unforeseeable circumstances. Every day in this communicative context, we explore how participation can be made fairer, open to other languages and forms of expression.
- **We want to make a difference along the way in academia and beyond.** There is a growing gap between the monolingual / monocultural conception and organisation of university institutions and the daily reality of multicultural life. This gap is also apparent in other spaces of academic life, such as high-impact journals and plenary sessions at congresses. This breach must be closed, to

make academia more accessible, more inclusive, fairer, less Eurocentric, more culturally and linguistically diverse, closer to society and more committed. Our goal is that the knowledge we produce should not remain solely in the academic world, but be used to improve living conditions and redress inequality.

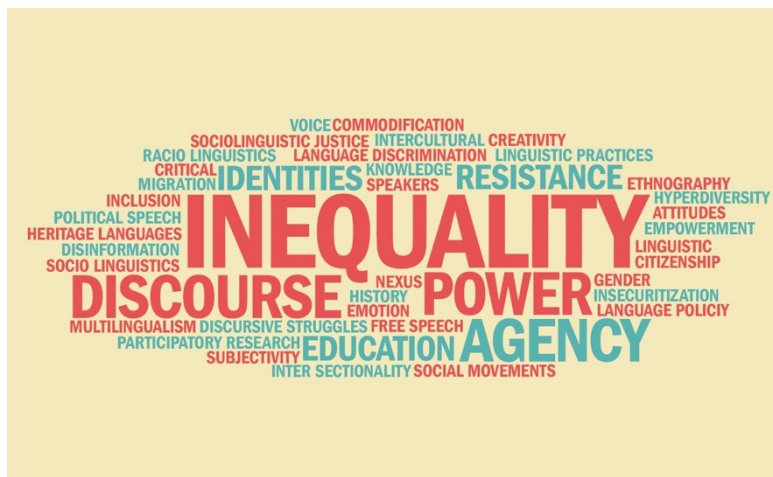
**The task we are facing is complex, indeed titanic.** There is much to do and there is no easy path to success. Nevertheless, we accept the challenge and intend to make MIRCo a transformative centre.

### What is our mission?

Our ambition is to create a research centre that is transformative in at least two interrelated aspects: 1) producing transformative knowledge; 2) transforming academic research practices.

As regards transformative knowledge, we aim to explore the above-mentioned transformations and their social, cultural, linguistic and political causes and consequences. To do so, we must first achieve:

- Productive interactions among different fields, connected by the adoption of a critical standpoint and focused on contemporary social issues;
- The mobilisation and rethinking of concepts that will foster understanding of what is happening and enable us to problematise the responses offered. The concept cloud, collectively created, illustrated below represents the areas that will be addressed by MIRCo, highlighting inequality, power, discourse, and agency:



Clearly, the role of language and discourse in the production and reproduction of social inequality is centrally placed in our research scope. But at MIRCo we intend to transfer this debate to be considered by society as a whole, bearing in mind that the role of language as the engine and justification of social inequality is often ignored by social movements and by the general population. In situations of inequality, many types of exclusion based on gender, social class and/or membership of minority and racialised communities are at the same time mediated by linguistic issues. This is especially so when there exist socially hegemonic positions that foster, for example, exclusion based on physical features, accent or speech patterns as an argument to foreignise, racialise or subordinate.

Over time, we have established the meaning we wish to assign to the research terms addressed. For example, our view of “power”, which occupies a central place in the cloud, not only allows us to reflect upon the consequences of domination and on the different types of power that may be exerted, but also to understand it as a relationship of forces. These forces do not “belong” to anyone and can be applied from any position. From this understanding, there exists not only consent, but also the possibility of opposition and resistance, in any space and time. For this reason, as well as theoretical debates, there must be a transformative will to explore and locate spaces in which resistance may be offered.

The intended research trajectory is not limited to the distribution of study findings, but will be continued with commitments towards and interventions by all stakeholders, including social actors, institutions and organisations. To do so, our investigations will be based on participatory, action-oriented methods, seeking to transform institutions and discourses and incorporating citizen science. Each of these approaches will blur the distinction between researchers and research subjects.

In addition, we aim to transform research practices and the production of academic knowledge through the conscious adoption of positions:

- \_ Opposing neoliberal logic in universities and in the production of knowledge;
- \_ Representing inclusive ethical standpoints, based on sharing with society, both in our own research and as universal goals towards which we aspire;
- \_ Expressing a commitment to experimentation, to opening up new spaces and to testing new practices (for example, translanguage practices) and promoting technology that, in addition to bridging geographical distances, will help maintain linguistic diversity;
- \_ Opting for freedom, despite restrictions on funding, schedules, etc.

In short, MIRCo constitutes an experiment in “free” research.

### **What space to create?**

#### **CLARA MOLINA – MIRCo Governing Board**

To design this open space as a node for meeting, linking basic and applied research networks, we have followed a participatory, assembly process in which we have shared and discussed what principles, lines of action and research, research questions and concepts interest us, and of course our work agenda for the next few years.

Together with the transdisciplinary, international, intergenerational and multilingual character, which applies a critical, decolonial and pluriversal perspective, we want the MIRCo Center to prefigure other ways of doing things in the present. Against an “homo economicus” model, and even more so against homo neoliberal, our ideal is “homo cooperans”, which opposes the neoliberal logic based on competition and the commodification of all aspects of life, generates common goods, for example, through training, sharing resources and experiences, sharing knowledge, resources and tools.



### **What operating model do we want for MIRCo to respond to its mission?**

MIRCo's activities are articulated around three main axes channeled through three lines of work that we have called DIALOGUES, COMMONING and INTERVENTION. DIALOGUES seeks to "disrupt" knowledge, through dialog and the continuous training of the people who make up MIRCo, through the exploration of new visions and fields, organizing seminars, creating reading and debate groups, reflecting on concepts while preparing joint papers for conferences...

The COMMONING line responds to our commitment to collaborate, rather than to compete, and we want it to permeate our day-to-day life, to be one of the guiding threads of the Center. To do this, we are thinking of helping each other by pooling resources, teaching one another to take the knowledge we generate in our research to our classes, looking for ways to implement transformative actions ... because we do not want our work to remain in an ivory tower.

And that, of course, is linked to the third line, INTERVENTION, which, by the way, has attracted the most attention from the people who make up MIRCo. This line seeks collaboration with students, with associations, with society. Here we are considering proposals such as joint work with political organizations to offer resistance to the advance of the extreme right, which is sowing hate speech and appropriating concepts, or with teachers of different educational levels, to try to transform the sociolinguistic order in the classrooms through teaching innovation projects based on service-learning and citizen science.

It is around these three lines that we are outlining the work agenda for the upcoming months. If you want us to keep you informed of the activities that we are arranging,

write to us or visit our website. Now our Secretary, Manuel Alcántara has the floor, to start with the final block.

### **International Advisory Committee Presentations**

#### **MANUEL ALCÁNTARA – MIRCo Secretariat**

MIRCo has an international advisory committee or scientific committee made up of renowned and internationally recognized researchers who have contributed indisputably to the creation and development of this field of study. Their involvement in our research center and in the trajectories of the researchers has prolonged over time, and their role in the lines and positions of the center are key, as we are going to see. Therefore, today they accompany us to reflect on the changes that, from their position and academic trajectory, they observe in the topics and research approaches, on what are the social processes that we must study today (such as the rise of racism and securitization), on how the academy itself has changed (neoliberalism, rankings, publications market). And, in these situations, what role can have spaces like the one we want MIRCo to be (horizontal, dynamic, open, to build common goods).

The interventions will be in Spanish or English. Unfortunately, Professor Ruth Wodak was unable to meet with us today, but the rest are going to join us.

#### **POWERPOINT IMAGE**

- The first speaker will be Professor Ofelia García, Professor Emeritus in the programs of Urban Education and of Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Cultures (LAILAC) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is internationally known for her work on bilingual education, language policy, multilingualism, and the sociology of language. Her work has had a great impact on the demands of the Latino community in the United States. Key for us has been her incorporation of the perspective and experiences of bilinguals into sociolinguistic theory.

(inside video)

- Second, Monica Heller, linguistic anthropologist and professor at the University of Toronto, will now speak. She is a former President of the American Anthropological Association (AAA). She is recognized for the impulse her research has given to sociolinguistic theory in general, and in particular for her contribution to the understanding of the complex relationship between social and economic processes and the social management and understanding of languages. Key for us has been her work on the commodification of languages in new economies.

(Monica has the floor)

- This will be followed by Ben Rampton, Professor of Applied & Sociolinguistics and Director of the Centre for Language Discourse and Communication at King's College London. We would like to highlight his contribution to the development of interactional sociolinguistics in relation to power relations, and to the understanding of the complex and fluid relations between identity phenomena and language. Key for us has been his work on crossing and the role of language in increasing securitization.

(Ben has the floor)



- Now Professor Teun van Dijk, professor at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona since 1999, director of the Centre of Discourse Studies. He is internationally recognized for his decisive role in the creation of discourse studies and, in particular, of the critical perspective in these studies. His work on racism in discourse has been key for us.

(give way to Teun van Dijk)

- Finally, although she will not be speaking today, we would also like to introduce Ruth Wodak, Professor of Discourse Studies at Lancaster University, President of the Societas Linguistica Europaea and for some time the only woman member of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. A driving force in discourse studies, she has taught us the keys to the discourses of the Far Right over the last decades.

We have reserved a place of honor for the closing of this event for Elisa Loncón, who will speak in the Mapuche language, Mapuzgún. She will be introduced by our colleague

We have reserved the place of honor for the closing of this event for Elisa Loncón, who will speak in the Mapuche language, Mapudungún, "Language of the Earth" (from mapu = earth and dungún = word). She will be introduced by our colleague

#### **CAMILA CARDENAS NEIRA - Visiting Researcher at MIRCo**

Elisa Loncón Antileo is a Mapuche teacher, linguist and activist, whose professional and academic life has been devoted to the revitalization of Mapudungun both in various Wallmapu communities and in university spaces in central and southern Chile. She is currently the President of the Constitutional Convention and fulfills the historic task of directing the process of drafting a new Constitution for the country. She was trained as a Professor of English at the University of La Frontera, and completed postgraduate courses at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and at the University of Regina. She obtained a master's degree in Linguistics from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Iztapalapa-México, a Doctorate in Humanities from the University of Leiden-The Netherlands, and another Doctorate in Literature from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. She has served as a professor at the University of Santiago, and has conducted research on the teaching of Mapudungun, with special emphasis on intercultural education and language policies. Throughout her career, she has worked as an advisor to the General Coordination of Intercultural Bilingual Education of the Secretariat of Public Education of Mexico, has had a role as promoter of the General Law of Linguistic Rights of the Native Peoples of Chile, and participated in the Council of Todas las Tierras, whose work led to the creation of Wenufoye, the flag of the Mapuche people.