What, why, and where in the widening gyre is a periphery?

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Abstract

A number of recent and ongoing collective sociolinguistic research efforts have made the linguistic periphery central, so to speak, while also subjecting the pre-text of center vs. periphery to critique. The spatializing trope and analytic model of center-periphery arose in social science in the 1960's and 70's. While Immanuel Wallerstei''s (1974) articulation of it as world-system theory is well recognized, precedents such as the dependency theory of Latin Americanists like Andre Gunder Frank (1969), or Johan Galtung's (1971) model of imperialist structural relations between nations, are now rarely discussed. Those theorists intended their model to be a critique of modernization theory's representation of "underdeveloped"/"developing" nations as lagging on a uniform trajectory of economic and political development and as held back by their own internal un-modern characteristics or by "breakdowns in modernization." From the very first, those early dependency theorists themselves highlighted the fundamental analytic insight now stressed by sociolinguists, that center and periphery are neither intrinsically distinct nor independent places, but rather are co-constructed as poles in a dynamic and even fractally recursive relationship.

In its origins, the center-periphery model was intended to be more about abstract social space than about place as the sense of locale that we see in the logic of authenticity as a foundation of linguistic authority and practice. Given this abstract dynamic, the spatial metaphor itself has always sat awkwardly on the analytic intent of the model, unintentionally facilitating the reproduction of the images of fixed, differentiated places favored by the modernization theory that the center-periphery model was meant to displace. Sociolinguistic inquiry, with its roots in geographical dialectology and interests in authenticity and attachment to place, can find itself caught in these implications. This presentation revisits early work on the center-periphery model and reconsiders the theoretical mileage as well as baggage that comes with this spatializing metaphor in the study of sociolinguistic difference.