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RESEARCH NOTES

Gender, discourse and call centres

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The general aim of this PhD study is to demonstrate that the call centre industry in the Philippines is gendered, and that discourse is a site in which this gendering takes place. This means that while gendering takes place materially –in terms of the actual genderedness of the industry as seen in the feminisation and masculinisation of certain spaces within it – it also takes place discursively – in terms of how certain representations in discourse and the speech style used in the performance of call centre work point to particular feminised or masculinised identities. Moreover, this gendering happens not only within the call centre industry in the Philippines but also within the new globalised economy under which the call centre industry is subsumed. This suggests that the material and discursive configurations of gender on the local level draw on and affirm the same configurations on a global scale, which means that call centre discourse is very much implicated in the process of globalisation. For this reason, it needs to be examined with this context in mind.

Specifically, I hope to show that, within the call centre industry in the Philippines and the new globalised economy, women and men tend to be equated with particular fields of expertise, which, interestingly, seems to emanate from stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity. The result is that women tend and are often represented to occupy positions traditionally believed to be feminine – that is, they do frontline customer service work or language and customer care training within the call centre industry, and, within globalisation, they tend to be relegated to service-oriented industries. Meanwhile, men tend to hold and are often associated with work that is considered to be traditionally masculine – for instance, they tend to be in managerial and technical positions not only within the call centre industry, but also within the new globalised economy.

Moreover, I argue that the feminisation or masculinisation happening on these various levels points to the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities among particular groups of people, in this case, women and men, and the differential value assigned to the kinds of things in which they are engaged. This is so because positions that are considered feminine, therefore aligned with and

assigned to women, are generally regarded as inferior or subordinate to masculine positions that are usually associated with and held by men. This means, on a macro-scale, that globalisation is neither a neutral nor uniform process with equal effects, despite claims otherwise, and this has repercussions on the various industries that are positioned and implicated in the process of globalisation. On a micro scale, within the call centre industry, this uneven arrangement holds true as well given how it is mostly women who occupy call centre agent positions, the lowest in the call centre hierarchy, and it is usually men who hold top- and mid-level managerial and technical positions. Overall, what seems to be happening is that the global arrangements of gender recur on the local level—that is, on the one hand, the call centre industry is feminised within globalisation, because it is part of the service economy and therefore in the bottom of the hierarchy; and, on the other hand, in the call centre industry itself, the frontline service work of call centre agents is what is feminised, since it is the position that has the most direct relationship with the clients and is the lowest within the call centre hierarchy.

These gendered arrangements are then reproduced and reconstructed in discourse as I hope to illustrate in the data that I have chosen to analyse. As mentioned earlier, I aim to examine two types of data: the first type consists of texts that are on or about the call centre industry, which, in one way or other, construct a particular representation of the industry. The second type includes texts that are used by and/or expected of call centre agents within actual call centres – for instance, the speech style that call centre agents use when transacting with clients – which have bearing on the issue of agency. To show how I envision these two sets of data to work out in the study, I provide two sample analyses, in which I look at, first, three written texts related to the call centre industry, and, second, a four-point list that guides call centre agents through the first step in call handling and management. Using the first type of sample data, I argue that, while the texts appear neutral on the surface, a closer analysis would show that they are, in fact, gendered, in that they make use of representations that either feminise or masculinise particular spheres of the call centre industry. Specifically, these texts feminise those spaces that are at the bottom of the hierarchy such as frontline customer service work, and masculinise those that are at the top such as managerial and technical jobs. As such, the gendering that is taking place in these texts parallels the gender segregation happening in the discourse of globalisation in which top-level jobs are generally represented as occupied by men and bottom-level ones by women (Tickner 2001; Chang and Ling 2000; Hooper 2000). In drawing on and affirming the feminisation and masculinisation of these spheres, these texts help in sustaining and reproducing the gendered

terrain of call centre work as it exists within globalisation, and are therefore complicit in the asymmetrical structures and relations that exist within it. Ultimately, what I hope to underscore here are the dialectical relationship between the material and discursive configurations of gender and the recursive relationship that exists between the local and global scales of these gendered configurations.

In my analysis of the second type of sample data, I argue that the speech style used in the call centre industry, while it indexes ‘powerlessness’, may in fact signal agency for those call centre agents who use and perform it successfully. The notion that the style required in call centres is a form of ‘powerless’ language comes from its association with femininity and service work. What this means is that the speech style in call centres is gendered, specifically feminised, in that it has certain characteristics – politeness, sincerity, friendliness and deference – that are associated with what is believed to be women’s way of using language (Cameron 2000b). Moreover, this feminised speech style is what is increasingly being employed in the globalised service economy to which the call centre industry belongs, thus its growing association with service work. Since both femininity and service work tend to be represented as subordinate or inferior to some masculine standard within the industry and globalisation, it is no wonder that a speech style that indexes both may be deemed as subordinate or inferior as well. Moreover, that it is mostly women who use it in contexts that have strict institutional constraints – for instance, in catering to the demands and complaints of clients or customers, call centre agents are instructed and trained to be friendly and cheerful, always, without exceptions, and even when the former are rude – further reinforces the perceived ‘powerlessness’ of this style. I would like to argue, however, that this is not necessarily true, especially in the context of Philippine call centres, in which the successful performance of this particular linguistic repertoire, this particular speech style, may render the call centre agents who do so a degree of agency that is often not possible in other jobs available in the country.

Overall, what I am attempting to do in this study is show how gender figures in the call centre industry in the Philippines and in today’s globalised world, how it is configured in the discourse that is produced and consumed in these spaces, and how these configurations relate to asymmetrical relations of power as well as possibilities for agency. It has to be said, however, that I do not mean to suggest that the workings of gender in these spaces are fixed and stable. First, gender itself is a concept that is neither fixed nor stable, as it is, in fact, constantly problematised and contested, which means that the way the term is theorised has

bearing on how it is represented and interpreted. Second, there may be other kinds of gendered representations in other kinds of texts on and about, and also within, the call centre industry in the Philippines, which do not necessarily agree with or may point to directions besides the findings of this study. Third, it is possible that, while the successful performance of the required speech style allows for agency in the context of Philippine call centres, this style may nevertheless continue to be viewed as a form of ‘powerless’ language if placed within the context of systematically unequal representations of gender and relations of power in discourse and globalisation processes. On a more practical level, this speech style may also be seen as a burden on, mostly female, call centre agents in that it is geared towards making them sound polite, friendly, and sincere even in situations that do not merit such responses, thus causing them an unusual amount of stress and anxiety. I acknowledge that these qualifications render the notion of agency tenuous, and may, in fact, weaken the position that I have set out in the beginning. However, what I hope to underscore is that agency is never absolute and is often constrained – such that any realistic discussion of the concept must take this limitation into account.

Perceptions of students and young working adults on their experience learning the English language: Case studies in Singapore

Irene Khng
University of Melbourne

The standard of English in Singapore has been a recurring issue of debate for the last 30 years. This study seeks to understand the language situation in Singapore through the perceptions of six students and young working adults describing their experience learning English in Singapore. The study proposes another perspective to examining the language situation – the language situation is a phenomenon. Two factors are integral in this phenomenon: the distinctive development in the English language worldwide with the appearance of the English variants, the New Englishes, at the macro level and the acquisition of English in the multilingual society of Singapore at the micro level.

This MA study set out to explore this using a phenomenological approach. It involved in-depth interviews with participants who would have been affected by language instruction and policy decision of the last 20 years. These interviews provide participants ‘lived’ experiences.

While the study looked at how English was acquired in a multilingual setting,

Singlish, or colloquial Singapore English, was referred to consistently by participants as a language used frequently in informal settings. Findings indicate that Singlish, which is often considered as the poorer form of these variants, is regarded as a language with its own contributions from the variety of languages which represent the major ethnic groups in Singapore. Singlish has also been seen as an identity marker.

An investigation into university students' written errors

Wu Siew Mei, T. Ruanni F. Tupas and Zhu Shenfa
National University of Singapore

This project funded through the Teaching Enhancement Grant of the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning of NUS involves the creation of a corpus of NUS undergraduate and post-graduate writing errors which is currently not available. This corpus is meant to inform course design, teaching, and admission policy concerning the teaching of English in the university.

Based on collected essays marked by competent teachers, this project will identify patterns of grammatical errors at the word, sentence, paragraph and discourse levels, characterise the profile of different groups of learners (*eg*, entrance level proficiency, faculty, nationality) with reference to errors made, and then differentiate errors that impede meaning from those that do not. The second part of the project is a survey which aims at finding out faculty and professional attitudes towards common syntactic and discourse-level issues and problems.

A key feature of this research is the use of a bottom-up framework in the analysis of errors in student writing. While analytical frameworks are available in the recent literature in second language writing, each analyst is first asked to analyse given essays, and based on their individual work a general framework is constructed and tested out using another set of essays. The framework is constantly revised based on problems arising from different sets of data, thus making sure that specific nuances in the writing of students in NUS are made to emerge from the analysis. The use of this methodological approach is to ensure that the framework captures the writing needs and problems of NUS students.

The study will benefit most courses of the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) of NUS which offer English language courses to most

faculties of the university. For example, it will benefit all the *English for Academic Purposes* courses (10 modules) of the Centre because they each have a grammar component. Besides that, implications from the study will also be useful for the four writing modules conducted for Engineering (undergraduate and postgraduate levels), Science and Pharmacy students. In general, independent learning exercises developed based on this study can be used by any interested member of the student community when they are made accessible through the Centre's independent learning centre website.

In particular, the data generated can be useful in the following ways: course design that is tailored to address specific areas of grammatical and discourse level needs; training of students to manage relevant patterns of errors effectively through self-editing strategies; production of independent learning materials that address relevant areas of lack for both CELC and the wider student community; production of software for the assessment of relevant areas of grammatical accuracy identified; provision of relevant information for administrative purposes *eg*, admission criteria for students with various standardised English scores. Small scale studies of a similar nature have been conducted on a very limited set of written data at the Centre. The results have proven very useful. As such, we have acquired some necessary experience needed for a similar type of investigation although on a larger scale. The experience gained will facilitate the successful completion of the project.

BOOK NOTICES

Knowledge, Beliefs and Syllabus Implementation: A Study of English Language Teachers in Singapore (2005) by Christine Goh, Lawrence Jun Zhang, Ng Chiew Hong and Koh Guat Hua. Nanyang Technological University.

This is an important study, carried out at NIE, of the English Language teaching situation in Singapore which, as the blurb says, ‘examined selected areas of teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, confidence, perceptions about learners, challenges and strategies for the implementing the syllabus at the school level’. At the time of the study, the challenges came from the English Language syllabus introduced in 2001, which in an innovative way moved away somewhat from the thrust of 1991 syllabus.

The concept of ‘teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge’ is a crucial one in teacher education. There has been a longstanding debate in the literature over the difference between an academic discipline and a teaching subject and how that discipline has to be ‘transformed’ into content knowledge for classroom teaching. In his speech on ‘pedagogical ways of knowing’ given in Singapore in 1990 at an IE Conference, the guru of teacher education in the US, Professor Lee Shulman, then based at Stanford University, said ‘In our research on teaching, we have focused increasingly on what teachers do to try to build bridges between their own understanding of the subject matter and their understanding that grows and is constructed in minds of students. The bridges are two-way: students actively construct and teachers construct. Those constructions play off one another’. Teachers’ beliefs and their actual experiences with students’ learning constitute one of the components of this ‘pedagogical knowledge’ to form those ‘bridges’. This NIE study provides some insight into those ‘bridges’ Teacher educators and in fact all educators are encouraged to read this very useful study.

Philosophical Reflections for Educators (2008), edited by Charlene Tan. Cengage Learning Asia.

It was Roger Sutcliffe, President of SAPERE in UK (Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education), who speaking at an STU function to teachers in 2007 remarked, ‘Perhaps we should be looking, not for every school to teach philosophy, but for every schoolteacher to teach philosophically’. In a sense, Charlene Tan of NIE was responding to this point with this edited volume of essays, aimed at engaging teachers, curriculum developers, school leaders, and others in philosophical

reflections.

The 20 chapters in the book were contributed by an international team of philosophers and educators, among whom are Phil Cam, Clinton Golding and Stephan Millett from Australia, who have been actively supporting STU's Philosophy for Children's programme, Chong Kim-chong, now based in Hong Kong, S Tagore originally from India, now teaching at NUS, and Teoh Chin Leong, currently philosophy coordinator at Raffles Girls School (Secondary). The chapters are categorised into two large sections, under the headings of (Part I) Philosophers on Education, and (Part II) Philosophies and Issues in Education. Part I draws attention to the key ideas of 11 thinkers on different aspects of education, such as those of thinkers in the classical tradition (*eg*, Socrates and Confucius) and those writing in the early 20th century (*eg*, John Dewey and Montessori), while Part II highlights selectively the major philosophical world views and concepts that still have much relevance to education today (*eg*, the nature of ethical thinking in moral education and the function of philosophical questions).

As Paul Standish of the Institute of Education of the University of London said in his Foreword to the book, 'Any practising or novice teachers who are ready to pause and to reflect will find themselves richly rewarded by the entry these essays offer into different ways of thinking for these are ways of thinking that can make sense of the world....' This book provides valuable background reading to all educators, particularly those who teach philosophical thinking, knowledge and inquiry and critical thinking in post-secondary education and also philosophy for children in primary and secondary schools.

Changing Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar (2007), edited by T. Ruanni Tupas, Yuan Yi and Christianty Nur. Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics.

This is a collection of the papers presented at the Colloquium (held in Nov 2003) jointly organised by STU and SAAL under the title of 'Perspectives on Grammar in the Classroom'. The Colloquium covered four general topics: Changing perspectives on grammatical 'acceptability', Data-driven learning of grammar, Teaching grammar through innovative means, and Online resources for self-learning of grammar. The papers reproduced in this volume reflect those four topics. Just to cite just three of the papers: 'Grammar and fluency in Singapore in internationally acceptable English' by Tom McArthur of the UK (former editor of *English Today* Journal); 'Where the grammar syllabus ends and the teacher

begins' by Tony Hung of the Hong Kong Baptist University; 'From grammar to text: A grammarian's approach to text types' by Lubna Alsagoff and Joyce James of NIE. Teachers and others engaged in the teaching of the English Language will find much (ideas and practical suggestions) to reflect on in this volume. The term 'Pedagogical Grammar' (as distinct from 'Reference Grammar') as used in the title of this volume often refers to a type of grammatical analysis designed to meet the needs of a second language learner to use the language, and is characterised by usefulness and ease of learning. In the Postscript to the volume, the editors' advice is 'we know that a sound knowledge of grammar contributes tremendously to good writing, but the questions of what grammar to teach and how much grammar to teach remain to be determined largely by contexts'.

A Visual Grammar of English (2007), by Lubna Alsagoff. Prentice Hall.

In this book, author Lubna Alsagoff of NIE defines pedagogical grammar as 'a special type of grammar that is mostly descriptive, but might also be seen as prescriptive in some ways.' One of the problems that must be faced in conceptualising a pedagogical grammar for students here or elsewhere is to keep a balancing act between description (of the variability of English) and prescription (what the rules are). In essence, the question is: how to present the different features of English as acts of communication (both spoken and written) within a form-meaning-making framework. Lubna Alsagoff decided on a visual approach. As she explained in the Preface to her readers the methodology employed: 'To help you 'see' how grammar works, I incorporate charts, diagrams and pictures into my explication and presentation.' The Introduction to the book is clear and substantive and should be most helpful for the teacher. Subsequent sections describe the main features of English grammar, with the final section 'putting things together', a summative section which is not often found in grammar books. The final section also introduces the readers (teachers as well as senior students) to online concordances and corpora. All teachers of English should find this volume very useful.

Written by Ho Wah Kam
Singapore Teachers' Union and SAAL Advisor

What is the ESEA Conference Series?

The English in South-east Asia conference series is the result of collaboration between the National Institute of Education (Singapore), the University of Malaya (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), the University of Brunei Darussalam, Curtin University (Perth, Australia), Ateneo de Manila University (Quezon City, the Philippines), Hong Kong Institute of Education, Sanata Dharma University (Yogyakarta, Indonesia) and King Mongkut's University of Technology (Thonburi, Thailand).

ESEA representatives from the collaborating institutions are:

- National Institute of Education, Singapore: Low Ee Ling
- University of Malaya, Malaysia: Azirah Hashim
- University of Brunei Darussalam, Brunei: David Prescott
- Curtin University, Australia: Ti Foong Yuen
- Ateneo de Manila University, the Philippines: Ma. Luz C Vilches
- Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong: Andy Kirkpatrick
- Sanata Dharma University, Indonesia: Francis Alip
- King Mongkut's University of Technology, Thailand: Pornapit Darasawang

For more information, visit this website:

http://www.ell.nie.edu.sg/innerpages/News_n_EVENTS/ESEA/ESEA.HTM

NEWS FLASH

SAAL offers heartiest congratulations to

- former president **Anne Pakir** on being appointed Director of the International Relations, National University of Singapore
 - committee member and co-editor of *SAAL Quarterly* **Lawrence Zhang** on being promoted to Associate Professor in the English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education
 - current president **Chng Huang Hoon** on being appointed Director of the Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning, National University of Singapore, with effect from August 2008.
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ABSTRACTS

Abstract of keynote addresses delivered at the 43rd RELC International Seminar on the theme: *Language Teaching in a Multilingual World: Challenges and Opportunities* held in Singapore from 21-23 April 2008

(1) 'Sounding local and going global: moving beyond intelligibility in the pronunciation classroom' by Ee-Ling LOW, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

The rise of English as a global language in the 21st century is undeniable. Today, the number of people who speak English as a first or second language is 1½ – 2 billion and it is spoken in over 75 territories around the world. The global spread of English has also led to the development of 'new Englishes' where English is first introduced through colonisation but may go on to become nativised, acquiring their own unique syntactic, phonological and lexical features. In South-east Asia, in the last 15 years or so, research on the pronunciation of varieties of English has provided empirical acoustic validation for the earlier impressionistic studies made. Using the corpus-based phonological descriptions provided by earlier scholars as starting points, the present paper draws on the author's first-hand investigations, supplemented by work by other scholars in the field, on the phonological features of a few South-east Asian varieties of English *ie* Singapore, Malaysian, Hong Kong and Phillipine English. In spite of the differences exhibited by these varieties, their similarities are much more noteworthy, both at the segmental and suprasegmental levels. A few preliminary observations include: a greatly simplified 6-vowel system (with complete lack of tense/lax or long/short contrasts), a simplified consonant system (with fewer place contrasts, and in most cases a lack of voiced/voiceless contrasts), syllable-timed rhythm, a simpler and more regular stress assignment system, etc.

The paper discusses the tension between sounding local and the need to go global and the attempt to find the equilibrium for pedagogical purposes will also be discussed in the light of recent research and debate in this field. The paper explores issues that move beyond the intelligibility debate to consider pragmatic and socio-cultural norms that ultimately should shape the pronunciation syllabus in full recognition of the 'glocal' identity of its users.

(2) 'Bilingual education policy in Singapore: challenges and opportunities' by GOH Yeng-Seng, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

This paper, comprising of eight sections, offers an in-depth discussion on the evolution, challenges and opportunities in relation to the bilingual education policy in Singapore. Section 1 provides a historical overview of the sociolinguistic profile and bilingual education policy of Singapore. Section 2 analyses the sociolinguistic status of the English language (EL) and Chinese language (CL) through a detailed discussion regarding the official, administrative and ethnic languages in Singapore. An analysis of the educational status of EL and CL from the linguistic (L1/L2/FL/MT) and pedagogical (curriculum design; language medium of instruction) perspectives is presented in Section 3. Section 4 investigates the 2 phases of the ongoing massive language shift in the Chinese community. Section 5 looks at the achievements and future prospects of the 'Speak Mandarin Campaign' through reviewing the objective, scope and target audience during various phases of the campaign. Section 6 gives an account of the 3 major CL pedagogical reforms, led respectively by Ong Teng Cheong (1992), Lee Hsien Loong (1999) and Wee Heng Tin (2004), and ongoing changes made to the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools and the Chinese Language 'B' (CL B) syllabus. Section 7 explores the future direction of the teaching of CL in Singapore by looking at the implementation of new Ministry of Education initiatives, including the Bilingual Approach (BA) and the Bicultural Studies Programme (Chinese). The final section discusses the role of CL in the Singapore context and its challenges and opportunities from a global language perspective.

Abstracts of papers accepted for the Conference on ‘Re-visioning English Studies in Asia’ on the theme: Effective pedagogical strategies to manage the Asian classroom, to be held on 20–22 November 2008 at the Onyang Hot Spring Hotel, Onyang, Korea

The following are three abstracts for a panel entitled ‘Empowering students, empowered voices: technology, ethics and equal participation in the multicultural classroom’

(1) ‘Silent or silenced: technological interventions in a Singaporean classroom’ by Chng Huang Hoon, Department of English Language & Literature, National University of Singapore

Among the many encounters in classrooms across the world, many instructors are familiar with the issue of voice, that is, the unequal contributions by students in any classroom they have taught, with some students dominating the class discussions, and others effectively silenced or choosing to remain silent. As instructors, regardless of disciplines and contexts, our challenge is to develop pedagogical strategies to manage this uneven distribution of student voices.

Singapore is often characterised as cosmopolitan on the surface but Asian (read: conservative) at its core. Generally well-educated in English, many Singaporean students seem to possess a confident demeanour, and are generally said to be less reserved than their counterparts from the Asian region. However, any close-range classroom encounter at the national university will soon reveal a slightly different, more nuanced story.

Singaporean students have traditionally been brought up in a traditional education culture where the good student is constructed as an attentive learner, disciplined, hardworking, obedient and respectful of authority, the teacher. This scenario is true of most school situations though increasingly, there are calls for ‘creativity’ in the classroom (read: teach less, learn more, through more varied approaches to learning and teaching) and greater flexibility to accommodate different types of learners or learning styles. At the tertiary level, many classrooms operate using the lecture format, though increasingly, discussion formats, especially for smaller class sizes, that promote fluid interactions are becoming more and more common. In transiting from the lower school levels (where classroom discipline is more tightly policed) to the tertiary mode of education, many students in Singapore have to learn to negotiate anew and to adapt to a new classroom culture.

My paper uses the case of my Singaporean classroom experience to discuss the important issue of voice. It highlights some of the obstacles, real or perceived, that block some students' attempt to speak up in class. I will then report on how the deployment of one kind of technological intervention – the creation of a cyber classroom – may alleviate the silence, thus promoting more equal participation in the classroom.

(2) 'Ethics, ethnics and pedagogy: on teaching ethics in a multicultural classroom' by Ingrid M. Hoofd, Communications and New Media Programme, National University of Singapore

For several years now, I have been teaching a new ethics module in the media programme at the National University of Singapore, which addresses issues of justice and morality in relation to the new global economy and its technologies of in- and exclusion. This module seeks to ground its syllabus as well as its pedagogy in the post-structuralist idea of *hospitable thought* and a building of awareness around issues of power both in- and outside the university. One of the major challenges in teaching such an ethics class in a multicultural classroom, is to strike a balance between a creating a relative openness to alterity, while simultaneously building a sufficiently authoritative framework for the students in which to understand contemporary technological moral issues. A particular area of complication is how the European continental philosophical assumptions of the course intersect (or not) with the students' and teacher's relative positions of privilege in terms of notions of class, gender, and especially race. This intersection gives rise to particular modes of empowerment, leading to a reproduction as well as a shifting of privilege in the classroom itself. In this paper, I will share some of my experiences in handling this conundrum, while delving deeper into the impossibility of an ethics of pure hospitality as well as of total moral theoretical authority, due to ethics' fundamental though usually implicit relation to the 'ethnic'. Since the teaching of ethics is then always shaped by certain historical and political forces, this paper will eventually endeavour to situate the module in the particular socio-economical logic that currently guides Singapore.

(3) 'Empowering students, empowered voices: technology, ethics and equal participation in the multicultural classroom: a critique' by Vanessa Andreotti, School of Educational Studies and Human Development, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

Vanessa Andreotti is our panel discussant/respondent. She will provide a critical response to the two papers above at the conference.

**SAAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS
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