Response to Adam Głaz's review article "Linguacultural Worldviews in a Postcolonial Context. Reflections on Carsten Levisen's *Postcolonial Semantics: Meaning and Metalanguage in a Multipolar World*"[1]

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Acknowledgement of Carsten Levisen's response of my review article on his book *Postcolonial Semantics*

I am very pleased to be granted this opportunity to introduce Carsten Levisen's generous response to my review article on his book *Postcolonial Semantics*,[2] published in this issue of *Alizés*. I am humbled by the seriousness with which he has approached my contribution – I find it "suaviter in modo, fortiter in re." I am also looking forward to further discussion that will certainly ensue, through publications, conference talks, and one-to-one exchanges. The longer I think about semantics and the concepts that Levisen's work has brought into the foreground (Postcolonialism, words, worldviews, people in places, the "unthinking" of semantics, or indeed the very fundamental language, culture, linguaculture, and dialect), the more it feels like we have only just embarked on this fascinating journey.
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Response to Adam Głaz's review article

First, I would like to thank the editors of *Alizés – Revue Angliciste de La Réunion*. I am grateful for the opportunity to write a response to the review of my *Postcolonial Semantics: Meaning and Metalanguage in a Multipolar World*. It is deeply meaningful for me to engage with the readers of Alizés on this very topic. Although the empirical engagement in my open-access monograph is in a different oceanic region, namely the South Pacific, I believe that Réunion and the wider Indian Ocean region offer valuable comparative perspectives on postcolonial meaning-making and significant possibilities for collaborative research.
I would also like to thank my reviewer, Adam Głaz, for engaging with the framework of Postcolonial Semantics in a constructive and dialogical way. He acknowledges my work as an "innovative approach to semantics in a postcolonial context," and also as "a radical approach, perhaps revolutionary in many respects." As Głaz notes, the "postcolonial" in *Postcolonial Semantics* is not an era-designating concept, but rather an analytical lens *on* semantics. As the field of decolonial and postcolonial linguistics is currently expanding, the monograph is intended as a semantics-oriented companion to these movements. The book is an exercise in "unthinking semantics," and especially in "unmaking global linguistics." It is about local concepts such as *toktok*, *lanwis*, *manples*, *graon*, *bubu*, *tawi*, *kros*, *les, nakaemas*, and the story they tell us. And this takes us to the first point of our conversation, namely the role of "culture" and "language." It seems to me that Głaz trusts these two concepts more than I do. When I prioritize the research agendas into "words and ways of speaking," and "words, people, and

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[2] De Gruyter, 2024.

place," I try to move beyond "language and culture," recognizing that these two complex concepts are fraught with Eurocolonial baggage, and lacking conceptual equivalents and global explanatory power. By contrast, *words* (*toktok*), *people* (*ol man*) and *place* (*ples*) are simple, translatable, and can be utilized in the analysis of complex semantic ideas, including the repertories of Eurocolonial, precolonial, and contact-zone concepts. Thus, my end goal is not to reify "words, people and place" as a new theoretical triangle, but to transform these elements into a multitude of bottom-up emic analyses (which is what I attempt to do in Chapters 3 to 7). Rather than defining "culture," or seeking to refine it, my vision is to decentre it. Thus, my interest in "ways of meaning, ways of living, and ways or thinking" is not intended as a definition of culture, but rather a research agenda that includes, what we speakers of English call *culture*, and what speakers of Bislama call *kastom* (roughly, traditional ways of living on the land, the ways of the ancestors, pre-colonial ways of doing things). What this mean for my understanding of "linguaculture" will require further space than what I have available here, but in my view, conceptual holism and terminological fusion are not enough. As we approach human worlds, their people and their words, we need to go further than debating whether it is "language in culture" or "culture in language." In order to stay helpful, "linguaculture" must show us a way out of "language" and "culture," not trap us in etymology. And "people, words and place" is thought of as one such escape.

Does *Postcolonial Semantics* emphasize the meaning of words too much? Needless to say, I agree that meanings go beyond semantic meaning. We find meaning in art and architecture, in silence, smiles, and spoken words, but as a semanticist I take it as my primary job to contribute to the study of meanings in words and constructions. Apart from lexical semantics, the monograph has numerous analyses of multiword constructions (in traditional terms, it deals with "grammatical semantics"), as Głaz also notes. I include also scripts for linguistic practices and discourse logics (in traditional terms: "the semantics-pragmatics-interface"). So while the palette of semantics is broad, I admittedly did not move into general semiotics. The monograph's aim has been to contribute to decolonial and postcolonial linguistics which until now had not seen any major semantics-centered publications (but see also Ameka and Levisen). I unapologetically speak about word meanings as being important, and indeed defining for our realities. Contextually this must be seen in a broader academic conversation on the "status of words." In contemporary Anglo-Western theorizing in the humanities, we have seen a "material turn" in which material things, physical environments, technologies, and bodies have become *the* center of analysis. Occasionally, these new interests in materialities come with a "new logophobia" that actively downplays and trivializes the meaning of words. I cannot completely rule out that my impulse to "let words speak" is slightly countercultural. It is particularly appalling when the new logophobia insinuates that words only matter to people in the West, and that "the rest" work from embodied communication, deliberated from the constraints of words. As showed throughout the monograph, words matter greatly to Pacific Islanders: in fact few things in life matter more than how you *sakem toktok*, how you "throw your words" (see Chapter 7).

On the more technical detail, I will maintain that "words are labels for concepts." And when I write that "words are knowledges," it could be elaborated as "word *meanings* are knowledges," and indeed: small epistemes. As a conceptual semanticist I reject the naïve realism built into statements such as "words are labels for ready-made objects in the world," and to me concepts are nothing but crystallizations of shared ways of meaning. From my work in the contact zone, it is clear to me that labels can be latched rather transiently onto concepts, and shift at a fast rate. In other words, the same conceptual meaning can be captured by a range of shifting labels, yet the labels are crucial for attuning socially and communicatively to these concepts. In Pacific linguacultures, where word circumvention practices are common (see Chapter 7 on critical "taboo" studies), the label-to-concept pairing is a noticeable dynamic, but semantically

speaking, "meanings will find words." And all ways of speaking are, as Robert Hall memorably said, "fit to express the concepts of those who use them; and if they should chance not to be, they make them so" (Hall 90).

A final note on the concept of "dialect" in European languages. My overall point was this: while we certainly encounter micro-semantic differences among European metalinguistic terms, these are minor when compared with the macro-semantic contrasts found in colonial and postcolonial contact zones. The difference between *language* v. *lanwis*, or between *creole* v. *bislama* (with a small b), illustrates this more fundamental level of divergence, as discussed in Chapter 4. I am not aware of studies that demonstrate major meaning differences in cross-European analysis of words such as *language*, *Sprache*, *taal*, *język* and related terms. What is well documented, however, is the historical development of "a language" as a conceptual watershed moment in European identity nationalism, as Joseph Errington and others have shown. The meanings associated with the term *dialect* and "dialect-like" labels appear to show more diversity across Europe (cf. Chapter 4) but still at a micro-semantic scale. In any case, new empirical-analytical work on the full range of metalinguistic terms that originated in Europe, and that were later imposed or resisted in colonial settings, would constitute an important future research project.

Since my reviewer is a leading scholar in linguistic worldview studies, it is both fair and meaningful that certain potential discrepancies have been pointed out from this theoretical perspective. If I may conclude my response with a reflection intended to invite further conversation, it concerns precisely the globalization of linguistic worldview studies. I hold the concept of linguistic worldview dear for several reasons. It offers a compelling way of accounting for the products of linguistic relativity. It allows for the existence of multiple cosmovisions. And it provides linguistics with a framework for thinking beyond "structures," "systems," and "use," three notions that I deliberately circumvent in my book. It is important, I have learned, to distinguish between linguistic worldviews and worldviews, but I sometimes wonder how to best approach this distinction in the contact zone. In my most recent engagement with scholarship on animism, I have been brought into contact with critiques of the very idea of "worldview." In animism studies, the concept is often regarded with some suspicion, especially the assumption that there is a separation between the world and the ways it is viewed. In many accounts of animists' ways of dwelling in the world, what matters is not how humans conceptualize things and beings in the world, but how they relate to them. Personally, I have far greater sympathy for animist perspectives and animism scholarship, and the ontological turn in anthropology, than for the currently fashionable forms of new logophobia. The challenge for the future, as I see it, is therefore not to abandon the notion of linguistic worldview, but to engage with it critically and reflexively, and to find new interfaces of interest, including the animism-Christianity interface, the religion-secularity interface, and the need for closer collaboration between cultural linguistics, contact-zone linguistics, religious studies, anthropology, and the history of ideas.

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