

'From multilingual repertoire to language change: A critical approach to feature spread, borrowing and language ecology'

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We are in an era where categories are questioned: ethnic and gender identity and even citizenship are acknowledged as fluid and negotiable. They are added to what Appadurai, as part of first-generation conversations about globalisation and transnationalism, described as 'ethnoscapes': the various socio-cultural networks that individuals can be part of irrespective of place of birth or current settlement. So-called critical sociolinguistics has followed in questioning the integrity of language systems, highlighting the role of context-bound selection of individual features from complex repertoires in shaping what we perceive as named languages (Makoni & Pennycook 2007, Jørgensen 2008, Matras, 2009/2020, Wiese 2023). In effect these conversations have instigated a new epistemology of language that is particularly pertinent to the study of multilingual societies and increased mobility and shifts in individuals' linguistic repertoires, one that places in the foreground features and processes over fixed categories and system boundaries. It directly challenges the legacies of the structuralist revolution where language is a self-contained system. It questions categories around which we tend to pitch legal and policy measures to define and protect language such as notions of native speakers or of indigenous and autochthonous language. The questioning of categories has been partly instigated by a critical reflection on ontologies that accompanies the de-colonial agenda in the social sciences and humanities (Mignolo & Walsh 2018), one that has so far only marginally been received in historical linguistics (but see Mufwene 2020).

Drawing on the context of these debates I wish to introduce a critique of categories that have been discussed intensively yet also taken for granted in contact linguistics over the past decade: The notion of contact-induced change as 'borrowing' or 'transfer' from one system to another, the widely contested notion of pidgins & creoles as particular language types, the idea that 'mixed languages' constitute a distinctive type of language system (one that defies genetic classification) and the more recently established concept, still much under debate, of 'heritage' language and its relation to native speakers, second language learners and what social anthropologists have termed 'diasporic stance' (Brubaker 2005). I re-examine the relationship between what some have called the language ecology, and the individual's linguistic repertoire; I address the relevance of goals of communicative action and of the functional composition of individual linguistic forms and structures; and I present a new approach to contact linguistics that replaces the centre-stage attention given to fixed categories with an appreciation of type of process that bring about a spread of features.

References

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