Introduction to Special Section: Africanist Small-Scale Multilingualism Research from a Papuanist Perspective

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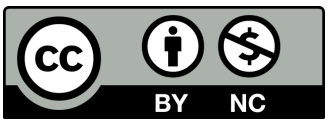

Research on multilingualism has a pedigree in modern Western linguistics, but in recent years, there has been a global flourishing of research into what is increasingly called 'small-scale multilingualism' (see Pakendorf et al. 2021; Lüpke 2016a; Singer and Harris 2016). Small-scale multilingualism refers to contexts of local and regional linguistic communities of multilingual individuals, with repertoires centred around local languages in addition to regional and/or global-colonial lingua francas. The populations of these linguistic communities are often small, numbering from the hundreds to the thousands. Other terms to describe such contexts are 'indigenous multilingualism', 'non-polyglossic multilingualism' (Vaughan and Singer 2018), 'rural multilingualism' (Di Carlo et al. 2019; Lüpke et al. 2020), 'egalitarian multilingualism' (François 2012), and 'multilingualism of small language communities' (Pietikäinen et al. 2016). Researchers employ a variety of approaches and methods, from qualitative and ethnographic (e.g. by Kusters and De Mulder 2019) to highly quantitative (e.g. by Dobrushina and Moroz 2021; Stanford and Pan 2013). The research may involve case studies of specific communities (e.g. Singer 2018 on Warruwi community of Australia) or descriptions of larger regions (e.g. Epps 2021 on the Amazon; Sankoff 1980 on Papua New Guinea). As a whole, findings from small-scale multilingualism research challenge dominant monolingualist models and theories of language (see Lüpke 2016b; Evans 2017).

The contribution by Africanists to the development of small-scale multilingualism research has been significant, with contributions of facts and descriptions (e.g. Ojong Diba 2020; Goodchild and Weidl 2019; Cissé 2011), development of frameworks (e.g. Lüpke 2016a; Watson 2019), and methodology (e.g. Mba and Nsem Tem 2020; Di Carlo et al. 2021; Khachaturyan and Konoshenko 2021). These works appear to be part of a greater Africanist linguistic research tradition that highlights the ubiquity and centrality of multilingualism in communities across the continent (such as by Mazrui and Mazrui 1998; Djité 2009).

As a Papuanist engaged in small-scale multilingualism research, the articles in this special section of the Nordic Journal of African Studies felt familiar to me in many ways. The three papers appear to represent a similar ethos to other Africanist small-scale multilingualism work with which I am familiar. While the languages and language ecologies represented in the articles are hardly small in terms of population size, the articles highlight the significant social aspects of local/vernacular languages in multilingual interactions, characteristic of small-scale multilingualism research. What stands out is that Africanist work often emphasizes identity as being borne in relationships (Di Carlo and Neba 2020; Chenomo and Neba 2020; Di Carlo 2018), maintaining sensitivity to local dynamics without letting go of the larger global perspective. Attention is paid to individual agency and linguistic creativity (Lüpke and Storch 2013) in multiple modes (Kusters 2019; Banda and Jimaima 2015). There is an awareness of contemporary language ecologies as part of wider historical contexts. This is not to say that individual Papuanist works on small-scale multilingualism are lacking in these aspects, but rather that the research programme on New Guinean multilingualism is still evolving a coherent character.[1]

[1] There is a vibrant tradition of scholarly Papuanist research into multilingualism (see Döhler forthcoming for overview), particularly in anthropological and ethnographically oriented approaches. However, studies of small-scale multilingualism have often been conducted on the basis of individual researcher curiosity, rather than as part of a wider research programme (however, see Aikhenvald 2014, or the Wellsprings of Linguistic Diversity project (Evans 2017, 917). Furthermore, the studies with high visibility seem to appear in the context of language documentation and shift (e.g. by Kulick 1997; Aikhenvald 2002), or in terms of educational policy and literacy (e.g. Schneider 2016). Research from this angle still has the hallmarks of small-scale multilingualism research in that it considers the social meanings of multilingual practices; however, research focusing on tok ples (i.e. local/vernacular/clan/tribal language) within the scope of a broader multilingual area appears to be more recent.

The three papers in this section provide descriptions of contemporary multilingual practices featuring Nigerian, Senegalese, and Tanzanian nationals. The three papers take a speaker-centric perspective to their analyses, looking at what it means to speak multiple languages and what motivates the speakers' linguistic choices. By offering glimpses into a range of multilingual practices and focusing on the details of contextualized speech, these articles also contribute more broadly to the topic of multilingualism.

Gernez's analysis of a single interaction between four villagers of Iringa Region, Tanzania, demonstrates how code-switching between local, national, and transnational languages helps negotiate delicate tasks and relationships in the context of work. The languages in question are Hehe (iso639-3 HEH), Swahili, and English. Three of the villagers are family members, with the fourth occupying the single role of employee. Gernez demonstrates how linguistic choice appears intentional, with the social meaning implied in each language reflecting the speakers' understandings of local sociolinguistic dynamics, for example, by using the familiar vernacular to diffuse tensions, or in the way the lower-ranked employee villager avoids speaking the national language because it may come across as uppity. Gernez explores the applicability of various models that consider the social functions of code-switching (e.g. as reflecting microsociological trends, as meaningful in sequences within interactions, as co-creating social indexical orders). Gernez himself does not propose one model as a better fit than another in understanding this particular interaction, thereby leaving open the inherently interpretive nature of social actions. Gernez ends by asserting the importance of investigating concrete cases of code-switching by multilingual Tanzanians, and calls more broadly for outsiders to consider Tanzanians' linguistic choices in the light of language ecologies and national history (this volume, 21).

Isiaka describes two examples of multilingual interaction between Nigerian university students. Through these case studies of casual speech, Isiaka suggests that Nigerian youth language practices are polylanguaging and metrolingual. Polylanguaging is the fluid use of linguistic features, which are often understood by interactants as originating from different social sources. Metrolingualism is the state of engaging in shared norms while interactants draw on various linguistic sources. Isiaka's analysis marks out stretches of speech that display elements of Pidgin, English, and other vernaculars. The languages mentioned in the analysis include Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, other forms of local slang, and what Isiaka elsewhere calls Campus Pidgin: a youth pidgin with noticeable Anglicisms, "neologism, clipping, blending, initialism, functional conversion and relexicalization" (2020, 74). The stretches of speech demonstrate the difficulty of externally identifying which "languages" are spoken where. The speakers themselves may also describe their speech as continuous, rather than as switching between codes (No, we jus' dey gist 'No, we are just chatting', this volume, 34). This fluidity shows the applicability of polylanguaging as a concept. However, speakers do indeed have notions of discrete languages, and the shared social meanings ascribed by speakers to these languages via associated linguistic features make apt the description of Nigerian youth speech as metrolingual. Some notions of translanguaging propose dissolving the idea of discrete languages, but Isiaka argues that, since speakers themselves talk about distinct languages, this should be taken into account when conducting any analysis of multilingual speech phenomena. Isiaka concludes by suggesting that speakers' sense of 'languages' as distinct systems may break down over time for high-frequency code-switchers, which may then, over generations, translate to a fossilized pattern of code-switching that is perceived as a single way of speaking (this volume, 38).

Lexander and Watson present a detailed demonstration of how a Senegalese migrant in Norway, who belongs to a religious minority within Senegal, engages multilingually via digital communication technologies of varying forms to maintain identity and relationships with

family and friends in Senegal. The authors invoke the notion of 'mobile chronotopes' to weave in multiple factors that constitute digitally mediated communications of mobile peoples. The notion of chronotope emphasizes the dynamic nature of identity as co-created by people in interaction. Identities are negotiated across lifespans by symbolic/linguistic acts and narrative reinforcement. To put it more simplistically and distinctly, the factors mentioned in the notion of chronotope include the following: time; distance; self and group identity; identities as comprising of relationships; the co-construction of identities using symbolic means including varying linguistic codes; the effect of linguistic modes (written vs. spoken) on language choice; and people's awareness and sensitivity to their language ecologies and the wider milieu. By sharing snippets of digitally mediated multilingual interactions, we see on the one hand how digital spaces incorporate many of the conventions and social meanings from embodied spaces and places (such as motivations for language choices). On the other hand, we are shown some particularities of digital multilanguaging due to the prevalence of orthographic and delayed modes of communication. For example, Lexander and Watson describe how text-based messaging unwittingly lays bare the divergent educational experiences of interactants because of differences in adherence to spelling conventions (this volume, 60).

The three papers cover a range of ways in which speakers occupy space and place, and collectively demonstrate how people construct social meanings with one another using any means available. Gernez's case study is firmly grounded in a local community, with relationships based on face-to-face interactions built up over time. Isiaka looks at the interactions between friends who come from disparate tribal affiliations and backgrounds, but partake in the broader areal community of practice, in this case, of Nigerian youth culture. Lexander and Watson consider digital modes of disembodied space, where the speakers occupy geographically separated places but communicate in spaces that transcend this physical separation. Speakers have access to shared sociolinguistic knowledge, and this becomes all the more evident in their creative expression through multiple languages. Different modes of interaction reflect the diverse ways this creativity is manifested.

The familiarity of the spaces of interaction presented in the three papers also displays the ordinariness of languaging (akin to Lee and Dovchin 2019, and contributions therein). This 'everydayness', to use Isiaka's word, makes languaging an important phenomenon from humanist and scientific points of view. Everyday languaging is important from a humanist perspective because it reminds us how fundamental languages are to us as social beings. It is important from a scientific point of view because it is in the everyday practices, iterated multiple times in subconscious ways, where cumulative and incremental changes occur and entrench themselves as diverse linguistic phenomena (Dediu et al. 2013; Croft 2008; Labov 2007). It is hoped that small-scale multilingualism findings also become 'everyday' in general linguistics, such that multilingualism is normalised and takes centre stage of linguistic theorising and teaching.

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