

DENORTHERNISING MULTILINGUALISM AND MULTILINGUALISM RESEARCH FRAMING LANGUAGE IN THE NORTH: FROM THE MONOLINGUAL NATION STATE TO ACKNOWLEDGING (SU- PER)DIVERSITY

by Friederike Lüpke ([SOAS, University of London](#))

At our recent conference on [African multilingualism](#), Jeff Good reminded the audience of how Westerners (or Northerners) are trapped in language ideologies that give them ownership of only one language. Concepts like “mother tongue” or “native speaker” reflect widespread Northern ideas on language and express the ideology that an individual can only have and master one language, and that this one language embodies identity. When monolingual Northerners learn other languages, they aspire to keep them apart from their first language and learn them to native-like perfection, with a monolingual native speaker of the target language being the usually unattainable goal. As most of us know from traumatic experiences in foreign language classrooms, this is a very costly idea of multilingualism. It instantiates what Peter Auer has called a “[monolingual bias](#)”: the idea that the languages of multilingual speakers can be clearly separated and should ideally correspond to two combined monolingualisms.

In the 21st century, more and more (socio)linguistic research is taking stock of a very different reality: that of lived multilingualism in an era of globalisation. The majority of this research looks at multilingualism in the Global North, where migration on a new scale has created an unprecedented “[superdiversity](#)” in the ways in which people interact and are exposed to languages. [Blommaert and Rampton have extended the concept of superdiversity to describe sociolinguistic settings](#). Research on Northern and Southern urban multilingual settings questions many of the tacit assumptions underlying conceptions of multilingualism, including the one contained in its name: that we can in fact identify separate languages within an individual’s language use. In their research, sociolinguists such as [Angela Creese](#), [Adrian Blackledge](#), [Brigitta Busch](#) and [Li Wei](#), to name but a few, find that language use transgresses the boundaries of the sociohistorical constructs

that we have come to know as languages in the dynamic and heteroglossic practice of speakers.

Standard language culture propping up reified Northern languages

In the North, the idea of languages as discrete entities with fixed boundaries is still reinforced by many practices reflecting the centuries-old standard language culture, which has its roots in Renaissance Christian reform movements and the invention of the printing press – the former fuelled by a need for the Bible to be available in vernacular languages rather than in Latin, the latter requiring Bibles be printed in a limited number of standardised codes to minimise costs. Standard language culture culminated in the creation of European nation states and the concomitant eradication of local languages. As long as this essentially written language culture lives on, languages are tangibly reified, as dictionaries, prescriptive grammars and spelling rules forcefully testify. In prescriptive writing, language separation persists through different orthographic representations or writing systems in contexts where non-standardised forms of writing show no boundaries between languages. This language ideology, with its reliance on writing and access to all domains as the central insignia of languagehood, also relegates all languages not used in writing to a subaltern position. Standard language culture is present in many contexts in the Global South as a reflex of colonialism, in the mainly ex-colonial official languages that occupy the highest position in the new polyglossic linguistic markets there. Many of the areas in question are hotspots of linguistic diversity. What are the multilingual configurations in these areas, beneath the highly visible polyglossia? Are there ideas of language and languaging that differ from those of Northern imaginations?

Small-scale multilingualism in the Global South

Radically different multilingual settings persist worldwide where small-scale pre-industrial societies exist at the margins of globalisation, and survive in the shadows of those settings and of languages regulated by standard language culture. These small-scale societies have been described as practising “[egalitarian multilingual-](#)

[ism](#)” by Alexandre François, or as [“traditional multilingualism”](#) by Pierpaolo di Carlo. When attempting a characterisation of different settings of this kind, it appears that a useful preliminary generalisation might be to group together all those configurations where multilingual language use is not primarily motivated by power relations or prestige accorded to particular codes. This does not entail that these societies are necessarily egalitarian or traditional; rather, it means that they have remained on the margins of those processes that create monolingual societies with standard language cultures or stratified multilingual settings, as produced in settlement colonies. There are many such societies still thriving across the globe, particularly in Africa, parts of South America, Oceania and vestigially in Australia. While small-scale multilingualism, if present in the public mind at all, is often imagined as induced by contact between small, essentially ‘tribal’ groups, it is rather characterised by very different linguistic and cultural practices creating heterogeneous societies with intriguingly complex patterns of language use and language ideologies. Within a single geographical area, Amazonia, societies in the [Vaupés](#) and [Upper Xingu](#) areas show striking contrasts in the makeup of their multilingual societies. In the Vaupés, a different language is, nominally speaking, a prerequisite for a woman to be an eligible marriage partner, and according to the ideologies, it is important to keep one’s father’s and one’s mother’s language separate. Yet, because of cross-cousin marriage patterns, women often return into their mother’s villages, so that in fact, whole villages share multilingual repertoires. In the Upper Xingu area, there is markedly less intermarriage and multilingualism, although the peoples in this society have a long history of trade and ritual exchange. In [Vanuatu](#), the country with the highest linguistic diversity in the world, small-scale multilingualism often results not only in multilingual households and villages, but is also reflected in multiple identities. Traces of complex multilingual societies remain in [northern Australia](#), where, prior to forced resettlement and linguistic assimilation, small groups maintained intricate relationships with their environment by owning one language, passed down from their fathers (which was linked to autochthony and land rights), and speaking several others depending on their trajectories, as it was

considered impolite to traverse territories whose languages one didn’t speak.

Language and land – a fateful misunderstanding

Australian language census data, reflecting Northern language ideologies by only asking for a single first language, notoriously fail to grasp patterns of language use, since they erroneously record only the owned language, which is not necessarily the one an individual speaks. Similar links between land and language based on concepts of autochthony and spiritual security are also attested in Africa. In the [Lower Fungom](#) area of Northwestern Cameroon, where Jeff Good leads a project investigating rural multilingualism, speaking a language gives access to the spiritual security of the chief of the village with which this language is associated. Being multilingual offers the protection of several villages. In the [Crossroads Project](#) on multilingualism in Lower Casamance in Senegal, we find similar links between language and land. [Multilingual speakers](#) can name one patrimonial language – the language of the founding clan of their village, passed down as the identity language in patrilineal fashion – which is not necessarily related to language practice but only conveys claims of patrimony and first comer status. Their language use reflects their life trajectories, social networks and systematic regional alliances. Since places have their languages, many villages have a nominal language, even though in reality they are multilingual due to women marrying in and out, children being fostered and strangers being hosted. These strangers can become very settled, but as long as they do not sever their links to their points of departure and become owners of their new territory, this is not reflected in their patrimonial language. Crucially, all other linguistic identities are [erased](#) in the patrimonial language ideology. This lack of necessary alignment between languages owned or claimed and languages spoken invites powerful misunderstandings, since it is so very different from the European ideologies that strongly associate father country with mother tongue. Many analyses of languages as endangered result from it, as mismatches between patrimonial languages and spoken languages are often interpreted as ongoing language shift when, in fact, the lan-

guage of the land was never the language of many of the people inhabiting it.

Not languages or languaging but languages and languaging

What the existing research on small scale multilingual settings worldwide reveals is that multilingualism is not just a product of large-scale processes of migration and globalisation that turn formerly homogeneous places and communities into superdiverse spaces. What it also shows is that in these societies, there is not just fluid and boundary-free languaging. There, as in the North, languages can be reified as potent ideological constructs for a variety of reasons. It is revealing to study them and how they differ from Northern monolingual language ideologies and essentialist conceptions of nation and ethnicity. It is also very worthwhile having a closer look at how and to what extent these ideologies are reflected in linguistic practice. For Casamance, there is [first research](#) on the interplay of local language ideologies and language use, with polyglossic ideologies manifest at the national level. For this area, we have come to recognise named languages as notional and ideological reference points that can at best be partly reflected in the most [monolingual language modes](#) or [single language contexts](#) of language use. In contrast to Northern standard languages, where this reference point is reified by a prescriptive canon present in parts of linguistic practice, its manifestation in speech in non-standardised settings is questionable. This

holds especially for contexts in which the closely related nominal languages of locations have been named based on [patrimonial deixis](#). For these languages, such as many varieties of the Jóola cluster in Casamance, the extent to which they are fully reified as full-blown linguistic systems is questionable. Our ongoing research looks exactly into this: to what extent emblematic areas of language, such as greetings, are fully differentiated, and local provenance signalled through an accent, while other areas may be more fluid [[Hyperlink to Mriam Weidl's film](#)] and not instances of code-mixing but of constant code-creation [[Hyperlink to Abbie Hantgan's contribution](#)]. Such findings question the very idea of language that is enshrined in Northern language ideologies. Crucially, both imaginary monolingual reference points and fluid practice are systematically at work in settings like Casamance. We have just started to scratch the surface of understanding small-scale multilingual settings and what they mean for the nature of language and linguistic interaction, despite the fact that most of human language was shaped in similar settings. Understanding these settings and how multilingualism in them actually facilitates social cohesion and communication, rather than resulting in the Tower of Babel situation so feared by monolingual Northerners, could teach a lesson to the North.