

Mixing approaches and switching perspectives: from a typology of language contact towards a typology of multilingualism

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Most studies on language contact generalize over groups of speakers conceptualized as communities which are characterised as monolingual, bilingual or multilingual in particular di- or multiglossic configurations. In contrast, research on multilingualism focuses on individuals and their dynamic practice, either looking at their trajectories and linguistic biographies, or at language production and comprehension under controlled multilingual conditions. These perspectives are complemented by studies on code-mixing that place emphasis on bi- or multilingual conversation as the main unit of analysis and investigate either the structural features of multilingual speech or social and pragmatic functions of two or more languages used in interaction. Finally, a growing body of research on language attitudes and ideologies sheds light on the great differences in constructing links between language and identity, and reveals considerable variation in the alignment between ideologies and complex linguistic practices often invisible to outsiders in different cultural spheres. These differences in scope result in incompatible data sets, research questions and theories of multilingualism and language contact). Therefore, recent work in this domain has stressed the need for a better understanding of the social settings in which multilingualism is practised in order to increase the predictive power of social and psychological models to explain the structural consequences of language contact and of contact-induced language change. First studies of social networks and communities of practice and the motivations for variation within them have been conducted in multilingual settings. These studies offer important insights for an integrated model that combines a detailed look at the individual with an investigation of wider societal perspectives. In this talk, I sketch the potentials and challenges of such an integrated approach to multilingualism and language contact. I start out by considering multilingual configurations of individuals (in spoken and written language practices) and what their dynamic profiles and changing patterns of language use entail for an understanding of multilingual language use in interaction in their societies. While focussing on my own current research in Senegal, I also draw on recent studies of multilingualism in Cameroon, Northern Australia, the Amazon and French Guyana. Findings from these case studies are used to stress the importance of the individual for analysing multilingual conversation, and, in turn, of the importance of synchronic multilingual language use in its entire variation for understanding language contact and language change.