Review

*Urban contact dialects and language change: Insights from the Global North and South*
Paul Kerswill and Heike Wiese (eds) (2022)

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This 2022 volume edited by Paul Kerswill and Heike Wiese is the fifth volume in the Routledge Studies in Language Change series edited by Isabelle Buchstaller and Suzanne Evans Wagner. Constituted of 15 nation-state focused chapters, an editor’s introduction and four commentary chapters, the point of departure in this volume is a concern with what the editors call ‘Urban Contact Dialects’ (henceforth UCD). UCD is explicated as vernaculars in urban settings that have ‘emerged in contexts of migration-based linguistic diversity among locally born young people, marking their speakers as belonging to a multiethnic peer group’ (p. 1). Bringing together the increasingly popular terms ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’, this volume attempts to showcase UCD in settings that the editors frame as ‘countries where societal monolingualism is the norm’ in contrast to ‘countries where societal multilingualism is the norm’. While these map onto the geographies of the North/West and the South/East in the volumes’ two parts, A and B, an attempt has been made to include one case study in each part from the opposite geographies – Finland in Part A and Tanzania in Part B. Part A, titled ‘Multilingual societal habitus’, includes case studies of Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal, South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, and Finland. Part B, ‘Monolingual societal habitus’, includes case studies of Tanzania, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Each part is wrapped up by two commentaries each.

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Each chapter, focused on one country, presents its nation state case study in four similar sections where a review and/or a discussion of existing scholarship is dealt with: 1. the linguistic and social context (which explicates social and demographic shifts that contribute to the genesis of groups that deploy the UCD or alternative terminology that the chapter author/s prefer/s); 2. empirical data sources (available in the nation state context and that the author/s draw upon); 3. structural findings vis-à-vis specific named languages/varieties, shifts, and linguistic features; and 4. sociolinguistic findings (including the status of the UCD [stylized or register-specific use], users’ social identities, indexicality, and attitudes). The term UCD and the common chapter structure – which the author of chapter 11 calls ‘the policy of this book’ (p. 186) – is seen as a way to enable comparisons between the cases. While the volume focuses on oral/spoken communication, many chapters present insights into written communication as well (including writing in media contexts).

Importantly, the case study contributions in the volume edited by Kerswill and Wiese bring together linguistic descriptions of UCD that account for ‘structural consequences of language contact’ with accounts of ‘(socio)linguistic conditions in which these emerged’ (p. 6). The volume editors argue that bringing these two traditions of language scholarship into one framing enables the field to ‘talk more precisely about how these new urban dialects contribute to our picture of language variation and change’ (p. 6). To this end, the four commentary chapters present structural and sociolinguistically aligned reflections on the nation state focused contributions available in Parts A and B. These commentaries present important critical reflections that go beyond the work presented in the volume. For instance, the commentary on Part A by Miriam Meyerhoff (chapter 8) highlights the need to include Signed Languages in any contemporary case study of a nation state (similar analytically framed arguments have been made elsewhere; see for instance Bagga-Gupta, 2017a, 2019).

The concept ‘language’ has seen an important shift (in north-centric scholarship) since the turn of the century wherein it is broadly conceptualized as communication; this shift has seen some scholars explicitly question whether ‘language’ exists and where it can be found (anthropologist Ruth Finnegan’s 2015 post-retirement book carries the interesting title ‘Where is language?’ and linguist Roy Harris’ [1931–2015] provocative scholarship includes a 1981 title ‘The Language Myth’). Naming traditions related to what is ‘a’ language and how ‘a’ language is differentiated from ‘another’ language have become increasingly relevant at a time when boundaries between named languages/varieties are accepted as being fuzzy and constructed and language is itself framed as people’s ways-of-being-with-words (Bagga-Gupta, 2017b). This issue is noted – albeit
in different ways and to different degrees – by the majority of the case study chapter authors. The emerging scholarship that questions the existence of ‘language as a noun’ highlights the importance of unpacking fixed understandings of the thing we call language (see, for instance, Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). While these discussions are unevenly present in various established and emerging areas of the Language Sciences, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a need to rectify hitherto marginalized perspectives and ‘voices’ if the efforts to go beyond northern and north-centric hegemonies and the questioning of the status quo are serious. In addition to the important need for ‘multiversal’ framings, this includes asking what language is, where it exists, and its nature (see Bagga-Gupta and Carneiro, 2021; Piller, Zhang and Li, 2022; Deumert and Makoni, 2023). This volume reviewed here contributes to this effort in that it embraces the need to go beyond both the geographies of the hegemonic North/West and in that it brings together and draws attention to both structural and sociolinguistic dimensions of human communication. However, questions can be raised about the UCD project itself, and they are indeed taken up by some of the commentary authors and case study chapter authors.

UCD goes by a variety of names within this edited volume. For instance, Contemporary Urban Speech Styles (CUS) is the title and preferred term used in chapter 12, which presents the case study of Norway. Other terms used include Multiethnic Youth Language (a number of chapters), Multiethnolectical style (many chapters), Contact varieties (in many chapters, in particular when authors reference the work of Kotsinas from Sweden), multilingualism, etc. Despite the slipperiness of the terminology, UCD (or for that matter any of the other related terms that authors take up in this volume) scholarship lies at the intersection of mobility related to demographic shifts in the recent decades in metropolitan areas induced by migration, peoples’ deployment of communicative resources (in such locations) from multiple named languages (which is glossed as multilingualism), specifically youth languaging (particularly male youth communication) informed by the empirical research of databases that include oral/spoken language repositories. Related scholarship that has concerned itself with linguistic contact issues in border spaces, i.e., borders between geopolitical territories remain outside the scope of this volume.

There is thus a plethora of terms currently in use in the broad area of the Language Sciences to point to some dimensions of people’s deployment of communicative resources from across multiple named languages, named modalities (oral, written, signed, embodied, etc.) across analogue-digital, institutional-non-institutional arenas. This plethora draws attention to the need for meaningful and sustainable vocabularies that do justice to the complexities that (northern)
scholars have started seeing, hearing, recognizing in human communication more recently. Here it can be noted that UCD does not, for instance, connect with another similar concept offered by Alastair Pennycook and Emi Ostuji in their volume *Metrolingualism: Language in the city* (2015; a couple of authors in the volume do, however, mention this term in passing).

Multiversal agendas, in contrast to the hegemonic north-centric universal agendas currently being critiqued in many parts of the Social Sciences and Humanities (see Bhambra, 2007; Bagga-Gupta and Carneiro, 2021), highlight the need to recognize and rectify centuries old erasures of alternative/southern ontologies, epistemologies, and cosmologies. Furthermore, and more critical to the issue at hand, pointing to and rephrasing Stephan May’s introduction to his edited volume *The multilingual turn* (2014), the point is whether urban settings are sites that have only recently become arenas where human beings engage with multiple communicative resources i.e., what is glossed variously (in different nation state and regional spaces) as multilingualism/plurilingualism/translingualism (including metrolingualism) or whether we scholars – in particular in northern and north-centric spaces of Europe, North America, and other hegemonic centers – have started seeing, hearing and recognizing the normal banality of this dimension of human behavior now. In this regard, the following question (including related types of questions) become/s relevant: Are recent migrations solely responsible for the complexities that are being pointed to in this volume? Earlier anthropological work that focused on remote rural settings in Iran (Brian Street, 1984), the Vai in Liberia (Scribner and Cole 1981), among others, have richly illustrated oral/spoken and written dimensions of the multiple named languages that existed and were engaged with in the daily lives of peoples who lived in those non-urban settings.

Human beings’ contemporary entangled digital-analogue existence also enables asking in what ways scholars can continue to justify a focus on languaging or communication through a reiterated focus on the physical localities inhabited by human beings in a digital existence? Following on points raised above, do Rural Contact Dialects exist and, how are UCDs related to languaging in border spaces? In a digital-analogue existence, what constitutes urban (or for that matter rural) and thus, does scholarly work in itself risk becoming complicit in the reiteration of geopolitical borders? The larger overarching issue here relates to illuminating analytically why urban, why language or dialect or sociolect, etc., why contact, why change? The issue of boundaries between spaces and entities – rural-urban, Global North-South, language/dialect/sociolect change – all presuppose points of departure from essentialist forms of things. The shift in conceptualizing language pointed to above can be understood here in terms of
a shift from a noun that fixates and reiterates boundaries to a verb that focuses on the sociality of human existence. This does not mean that boundaries do not exist, but that their entanglements in human behavior (and non-human tools, things) need attention. It is the latter that enables illumination of the complexities and fluidity of spaces and human conduct – of which languaging is a key dimension. To the extent that the ‘policy of the book’ builds on the explication of both structural and sociolinguistic findings from every nation state context covered in it, the volume offers critical new perspectives. A universalizing agenda nevertheless poses a risk.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the volume aligns itself with emerging calls within the Social Sciences and Humanities to move beyond naturalized northern or north-centric points of departure. This is flagged in the title of the volume as well as the organization of the chapters. Key scholars from different countries have authored each of the 15 chapters focused on nation states. The Global North/South are synonyms in this context for the previous vocabularies of West-East that map onto the colonizers/rich and the colonized/poor geographies on the planet. Recent and emerging conceptualizations in southern/decolonial/postcolonial/alternative epistemologies are drawing attention to the need to go beyond the geographies of North-West versus South-East. As others and I have argued previously, the Global South/east/majority, Global North/west/empire, southern/northern, etc. constitute vocabularies that point to territories, human beings, and more importantly to ideas that have been marginalized at best and erased at worst from the grand narratives of north-centric enlightenment and modernity (see, for instance, Bhambra, 2007). The geographies of the south/east literally map onto the new worlds that Europe claimed to have discovered, appropriated, and colonized since at least the 15th century and whose peoples it continues to colonize intellectually.

It is also being argued that human beings, conceptualized as belonging to the South/East include peoples in the margins in western/northern geographies, in addition to human beings in the territories that were colonized, marginalized and oppressed. While the two chapters on Finland and Tanzania in this volume can be seen as illustrative of this issue, in addition to migrants, functionally othered, racialized human beings, people marked by non-mainstream sexualities, etc. in all territories can be included in the idea that creates the binary South-North. This not only draws attention to the existence of a north in the south and vice versa but highlights broader issues related to languaging, epistemic democracy, and sustainability that enable recognizing diversities within and across geographies. Such thinking constitutes a key issue that shapes knowledge regimes. Thus, regions within nation states and nation states themselves in different
geographies can take on hegemonic positions, making it precarious to point to such units as homogenized constructs. While such thinking related to the problem of the unit of nation states is not new (see Anderson, 1991, among others), it continues to thrive in language scholarship. Given scholars own mobilities within and across nation states across their careers (and wherein mobility is physically as well as digitally framed), there is need to interrogate why we continue to draw on the contentious unit of nation states in our explorations. How can scholarship disentangle and free itself from the continuing unproblematized hegemonies of nation state thinking in its explorations of human existence and behaviors? While political framings shape ‘national’ access to databases (regarding language behaviors, migration statistics, etc.), can explication powers of ‘national’ geographies, school systems, etc. be analytically focused on ‘contact’ and ‘shifts’ between named languages outside such political framings (not least in our contemporary digital existence)? Scholarship within nation states (and at times within closely knit regions like Scandinavia, Central America, etc.) also risk the development of terminologies and research traditions that become naturalized within their own spaces (for illustrative purposes, this can be noted in the chapter that presents the case of Sweden).

A key strength of this volume is that it takes seriously language practices in addition to a language structural focus. This edited volume contributes to an ongoing critical conversation where alternative/southern/decolonial agendas are attended to. This agenda needs further refinement whereby multiversality replaces the continuing hegemonies of universality and in which complexities and variation related to languaging are attended to irrespective of whether the primary scholarly focus lies on oral/spoken languaging, written languaging, signed languaging, multimodality, multilingualism, etc., or on bounded geopolitical territories.

References


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