Editorial

Multilingual structures and agencies

This issue offers a multi-faceted view of urban multilingualism. It does so from a specific point of view, focusing on the relationship between structures and agencies, that is, between:

- established routines, structures and policies that exert a determining influence on local interactions; and
- local interactional practices that show people working with, appropriating, neutralising or avoiding established routines to reconcile the linguistic demands of urban institutions and the interactional business-on-hand.

With case studies from the U.S., the U.K., Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Belgium, this issue attempts to provide a descriptive link between structures and practices, global questions and situated responses in a diversity of institutional contexts and approached from different methodological angles.

Many readers will agree that the practice of studying multilingualism has very often involved a certain measure of rowing against the current, or depended on a form of sub-altern agency. Certainly within the more linguistically oriented areas of the academy, scholars interested in bi- or multilingualism had for long to work in defiance of a customary, and essentially nationalist, ‘monolingual mind-set’ (cf. Clyne, 2005: xi, cf. Farr, this issue); and they were compelled to sing out of tune with a hegemonic preference for retrieving systematicity in individual speakers’ cognitive abilities for producing language rather than for describing and explaining how language is used between speakers – let alone how two or more languages, or mixed versions of them, can function as meaningful communicative tools. Consequently, under these structural conditions attending to multilingual practices often entailed doing scholarly work as much as legitimizing and normalizing it. As an indication of the importance and the strength of this legitimizing reflex, Auer and Wei (2007) still anticipate it when they make explicit efforts to allay worries that their applied linguistic focus on multilingualism contributes to its problematization and subsequently reassure their readership that their interest is in how multilingualism is turned into a problem, adding that “far from being a problem, multilingualism is part of the solution for our future. Social stability, economic development, tolerance and cooperation between groups is possible only when multilingualism is respected” (2007: 12). Also outside of the academy, scholars of multilingualism have – with varying success – frequently stuck their necks out to rub against common-sense views of language and point out the negative impact of these views for the lives of bilinguals, speakers of minority, lesser-used or endangered languages, most clearly visible in the fields of ‘linguistic human rights’ (see, e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2009; Phillipson, 1992; see May, 2001, for a critical evaluation) and ‘critical language pedagogy’ (Baker, 2006; Cummins, 2000; Cummins and Hornberger, 2008; Hornberger and Baker, 2001; also see Alim, 2010).

But while addressing multilingualism two or three decades ago could be seen as somehow special, it would not be unreasonable to claim that the erstwhile conditions have changed and that (an interest in) multilingualism is much less problematic or unusual than it used to be. Not only has multilingualism become an established scientific subject with its own journals and well-attended conferences, but also beyond university walls, multilingualism isn’t merely a practice but now also an object of policy. Nation-states such as Spain, Belgium, Canada and others have seen successful linguistic rights movements emerge and now organise partial or nation-wide systems of bilingualism (or grant exclusive minority language use at sub-state level). And in trying to get their piece of the pie in the globalizing economy, more and more of these nation-states are developing overtly multilingual strategies to draw foreign investors and tourists and actively promote language learning to improve their citizens’ communication skills and mobility on the international labour market (cf. Heller, 2007a; Pujolar, 2007; also see Jaspers, this issue; Rampton, this issue). As a brochure on languages in the European Union – “Speaking for Europe” (2008) – would have it: “[l]anguages mean business”. And at least at EU-level, consistent translation and interpreting of legislation and parliamentary deliberation into all (viz., 23) member-state languages is seen as...
fundamental to citizens’ rights to their own identity and to the preservation of the union’s linguistic and cultural diversity. In addition, the EU sees it as its task to pursue integration among member countries by advocating that the latter organise multilingual education programmes, often in the form of ‘Content and language integrated learning’ (CLIL) (cf. Lyster, 2007). Many of these evolutions would have been hardly thinkable a century ago.

Yet, the present more benign view on multilingualism obviously hides the fact that not all forms of multilingualism are thought equally valuable or marketable in an English-dominated global economy (and much the same can be said for multilingualism in the academy). Likewise, the promotion of bi- or multilingualism in most western nation-states is usually shaped by a persistent monolingual view on language acquisition, literacy and codification: based on the argument that it is in the pupils’ interest to keep languages separate during language learning and teaching, to adhere to strict form-function relationships and avoid mixing, and to speak standard rather than vernacular varieties, language teaching programmes are designed to produce forms of ‘parallel’ or ‘standard monolingualism’, ‘sequential’ and ‘separate bilingualism’ or ‘bilingualism with diglossia’ (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2006; Heller, 1999: 271; see also Creese and Blackledge, this issue, 2010; Jaffe, 1999, 2007; Farr, this issue; Keating and Solovova, this issue; Rampton, this issue). And naturally, keeping languages separate helps preserve the idea of monolingual national spaces, unaffected by migration, diaspora and displacement. Not least, for all their attention to (elite forms of) multilingualism and despite EU-calls for preserving minority group languages, education in most western nation states largely remains a monolingual, i.e., majority language affair, where the use of and skills in ethnic minority languages gets frowned upon, is actively discouraged or simply ignored. Extra-curricular community language teaching projects cannot often pride themselves on active state intervention and support. Even community language use at home may get targeted as objectionable. In Flemish Belgium, for example, ethnic minority parents are seriously encouraged to speak Dutch as much as possible with their children lest they hamper the latters’ school careers; and while the importance of mother-tongue education was a major pedagogical argument in demanding Dutch linguistic rights in Belgium some 100 years ago, similar demands for mother-tongue education in other languages than Dutch are now usually depicted as unrealistic, if not as dangerously irresponsible (Moyer, this issue, notes a similar irony in Catalonia; also see Martin-Rojo, 2010).

Obviously therefore, there is still a lot of critical potential in identifying discourses of multilingualism that pay only lip-service to most of the languages spoken in inner cities today, and there remains a continuing necessity to spotlight the immense linguistic diversity behind the idea of monolingual nations and to confront authorities with their complete neglect of this diversity in educational programmes that claim to provide for equal opportunities (for excellent examples of this, see Extra and Yağmur, this issue; Yağmur and Extra, this issue). But there are also reasons to move beyond advocacy of multilingualism and minority languages and to a description of what goes on despite nation-states’ commodification of multilingualism or their refusal to support minority languages. One reason for this is that regardless of the (un)desirability of linguistic policies, urban language users have had to make do with and make sense of the contradictions and difficulties that arise from being a minority language speaker in a majority language environment, from being a bi- or multilingual in monolingual spaces, or from being the wrong kind of bi/multilingual in areas where there is an established or institutional form of bi/multilingualism. The empirical facts resulting from this merit description and explanation in their own right: how exactly do speakers and institutions manage the difficulties and contradictions between policy and daily reality? How are different languages (de)valued, (de)legitimised and misunderstood in institutions such as schools, hospitals, service encounters or families? With which effect, in their immediate circumstances and in the long run, for the owners of these languages, for those who fail to keep languages separate or who use a vernacular rather than a standard variety? And how do these linguistic processes intersect with the ways in which speakers are positioned within and respond to established discourses on ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, region and generation?

In addition, a purely advocacy-based analytical framework may pre-determine the data in favour of either/or parameters: language users tend to be seen as, essentially, either majority or minority language speakers, with a corresponding identity and stance vis-à-vis linguistic policies. Earlier analyses have, however, pointed out that it is often difficult to predict the impact of larger-scale discourses and representations on people’s everyday lives, and that a description of local practices and how people make sense of them usually reveals a complex, messy picture of accommodation and resistance, acceptance and refusal (cf. Erickson, 2004; Jaspers, 2005, 2006; MacLeod, 1992; Orntner, 2006; Rampton, 2006). Consequently, one can expect to find a similar messiness with regard to where language users stand in view of established linguistic policies, and in the reality of daily life, it may be hard to organise language users into different packages on either side of the majority/minority language group dichotomy (see also Pennycook, 2010). Certainly at the level of actual language use, a rights perspective is difficult to square with the increasing number of ambiguous linguistic practices among young people with migrant backgrounds in inner city areas who, rather than speaking either the majority or a minority language, produce a mixed, hybrid style or register that contains (clusters of) features of the different languages that are part of their linguistic environment while it hardly ever reproduces one of them exactly or purely – and there are many signs that such practices are quite popular among non-migrant peers and continue to matter in speakers’ adult lives. Approaching these unintended (from a policy point of view) practices with a notion such as ‘language’ or ‘the use of many languages’ becomes increasingly problematic, reason why many authors have preferred terms such as ‘(poly)linguaging’ (Jørgensen, 2008; Madsen, 2008; Møller, 2009); ‘translanguaging’ (Alim et al., 2009; Pennycook, 2007, 2010; Li Wei, this issue), or ‘vernacular heteroglossia’ (Rampton, this issue) to indicate that these “language users [are not using separate, discrete languages but are] employing whatever features are at their disposal, regardless of these features are, by some speakers, considered not to belong together” (Jørgensen, 2008: 167; cf. also Heller, 2007b: 11). The fact that this hybrid practice does not preclude advanced language skills in a monolingual standard norm, clearly means that it is tied to another norm and another way of looking at
and using language. In this respect, ‘languaging’ is often said to create its own space (Li Wei, this issue) or its own nation (cf. the hip hop nation and other niches in popular culture, cf. Alim et al., 2009; Pennycook, 2010), where linguistic mixing, sampling and re-styling is normative, where the owners of irrevocably new, hybridized or translated identities (cf. Harris, 2006) are full-blown, respected citizens. Rather than feeling linguistically wronged or nostalgically looking back to a lost purity, these translinguals are perfectly comfortable with their heteroglossic practice; they are “linguistically homeless, but happy, and proud of it” (cf. Li Wei, this issue), and do not want to be saved, but instead seek recognition for their translingual nation as equal to other, established monolingual or multi-monolingual identities.

Following on from this, a third reason for going beyond advocacy is that translinguals do not easily find such recognition in those institutions that are meant to foster their minority language skills, as in community language or complementary schools (cf. Creese and Blackledge, this issue). Given that these schools usually reproduce the wider-spread monolingual ideology and the ‘keep languages separate’ dictum at their own level to construct a safe haven or a separate minority language space, students and teachers often struggle with the contradictions that consequently arise: as a mirror image of official education, students find that their majority language skills are largely ignored, or that their vernacular skills in the minority language are declared as rural, backward, not up to standard (cf. Farr, this issue; Keating and Solovova, this issue). Far from offering relief from majority language constraints therefore, minority language teaching or being subjected to a strict minority language regime may itself become a stifling or unnecessarily constraining event. For many participants the whole experience is memorable for the wrong reasons and doesn’t lead to much language learning. Facts such as these point out that monolingualism and multilingualism, or majority and minority language use, do not fall neatly into respective constraining and liberating piles, and that multilingualism and exclusive minority language use have to be approached as potentially disenfranchising, contra Auer and Li Wei’s remark above that multilingualism is “the solution to our future”. The question indeed is: ‘what multilingualism?’ (cf. Moyer, this issue): a multilingualism predicated on the use of separate, enumerable standard languages provides for quite different opportunities than one in which explicit room is made for multiple vernacular varieties or than the hybrid practices where language users cross in and out of each other’s languages while only mastering these languages imperfectly (cf. Rampton, 1995). A multilingual norm can be as constraining a structure as a monolingual one, in other words, and as Meeuwis (this issue) argues, in some cases imposing multilingualism and minority language teaching may only add to existing inequalities. In the same vein, we cannot presume multi- or translinguals to be natural allies in fighting linguistic inequality or expect them automatically to rebel against a dominant monolingualism, as they may have no qualms about reproducing the linguistic hierarchies that disenfranchise them to disenfranchise others even more (Jaspers, this issue).

It may be more useful therefore, to recognize that multilingualism, just like monolingualism or forms of ‘languaging’, may be loaded with agentive, liberating and resistant forces or with structural, determining, constraining ones, or with something in-between, and that this is a matter of empirical investigation rather than a-priori assumptions. As the papers in this issue show, such an investigation will have to take different layers of context into consideration: the immediate sociolinguistic environment, the broader sociopolitical context and the longer-standing sociohistorical circumstances (Alim, 2010; Blommaert, 2005). For it is their co-existence that causes minority language use to be agentive at one level (resisting wide-spread monolingualism or majority language preference) while it is structural and Constraining at another (promoting minority monolingualism in complementary schools, e.g.). That is why Catalan in Spain or Dutch in Belgium enjoy a liberating, resistant image, symbols as they were of an earlier emancipatory struggle for linguistic rights, while this largely historical meaning is completely irrelevant for the present-day Constraining effect of both languages for speakers of ethnic minorities in schools and hospitals (cf. Jaspers, this issue; Moyer, this issue). And similar contradictions can be noted with regard to the use of the same language in different national contexts (see Keating and Solovova, this issue; also see Blommaert, 2010). Needless to say, a rights perspective or critical approach could benefit much from these descriptions, although it would imply replacing a linguicentrist outlook (Spolsky, 2004; Meeuwis, this issue) with a user- or voice-centered one. A perspective that attends to agentive, behavioural, practices as well as established structures may, furthermore, avoid the risk that, as a number of authors have been pointing out, resides in over-estimating the power of practices on the ground to the detriment of the longer-standing structures that facilitated their production in the first place (Heller, 2007a; Rampton, 2006) – a risk partly related to an explicit post-modern, practice-oriented approach of the social world, and partly to the existence of discourses of free choice, personal responsibility and self-building that posit the end of traditional social borders. As Coupland (2010: 257) argues, “there will [always] be a tendency to fix social identities, in the service of ideologies”; and we need to be aware that such-fixing can also be done in the name of multilingualism. Or as Rampton (this issue) shows, hybrid multilingual practices may acquire (semi-)structural qualities and offer a kind of semiotic freespace, but they still have to be located in the wider-scale social hierarchy that envelops them to estimate their potential impact and survival probability.

The necessity of looking at structures as well as agencies is also reflected in the make-up of this issue: it includes macro-oriented (Farr; Meeuwis) and quantitative work (Extra and Yağmur, Yağmur and Extra) next to much more micro-oriented, interactional studies (Creese and Blackledge, Jaspers, Keating and Solovova, Li Wei, Moyer) as well as work that combines the two (Rampton) in the hope that through a combination of these approaches and methodologies readers will develop a nuanced idea of the agentive and structural potential of multilingualism.

References


