Unsettling language for transnationalism research: Identity, materiality, imagination, and beyond

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Transnationalism has emerged as a key topic for research on language and globalization over the past decades. This invited panel reflects on this body of research and seeks new directions. It thereby asks how unsettling the notion of language can contribute to our understanding of transnationalism research epistemologically, theoretically and methodologically. As a starting point, the panel considers research on language and transnationalism in terms of three broad and overlapping perspectives: (1) research on how transnationalism affects and intersects with broad categories of identity (such as nationality, ethnicity, race, class, gender) across shifting linguistic practices; (2) research that focuses on the material dimensions of transnationalism, in relation to the mediation of transnationalism through various technologies and infrastructures and the political economic conditions that shape the processes of transnationalism; and (3) research that highlights imagination as an organizing force for transnationalism, through the ideological conceptions and visualisations of space and time (via chronotopes and scale) in discourse and practice. These perspectives also point to different dimensions of language; to language as an indexical resource for social differentiation, language as material resource and practice, and language as ideology, respectively. Against this backdrop, the panel questions the extent to which these different ways of conceptualizing language have allowed sociolinguistics to bring new insights to transnationalism as a process, and whether new ways of looking at language are needed. Panelists will be invited to discuss how their work on transnationalism builds upon or responds to one or more of the three perspectives, and to consider what kinds of synthesis or rethinking of the various ways sociolinguistics has understood the nature of language might bring research on transnationalism forward.

In doing so, the panel aims to draw greater attention to the indeterminacy and multifunctionality of language as a means of identifying new and holistic ways in which transnationalism can be rendered meaningful for sociolinguistic analysis; and to thereby consider what contribution sociolinguistics might make to the study of transnationalism.

Keywords: transnationalism, unsettling language, identity, materiality, imagination

1. Unsettling language for transnationalism research: Looking back, moving forward

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Language and transnationalism is a site where dominant notions of language are being unsettled. Research within the subfield over the past few decades has often focused on how transnational processes and flows press us to rethink language, leading to investigations of translingual practices that index new identities and positionings, material conditions that give rise to new modes of linguistic mediation, and shifting ideologies that lead to reconceptualizations of language, space, and place. Such research, in turn, served as one of the key foundations upon which contemporary sociolinguistics of globalization has been developed. This paper reflects on how research on language and transnationalism has addressed and theorized this unsettling of language through transnational processes, and to what extent the field of sociolinguistics has embraced the insights deriving from such research to unsettle its own view of language. Through this critical reflection, the paper sets the stage for the panel's discussion of how the indeterminacy and multifunctionality of language may be adopted as a perspective for studying language and transnationalism. In particular, it asks whether is it changing conditions of transnationalism that are unsettling language — or is it the embeddedness of language in the dynamism of human sociocultural practice that is unsettling the way we approach transnationalism.

Keywords: transnationalism, unsettling language

2. Pathways of mobility: The shaping of language practices and ideologies

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Studies of migration and language have helped operate a significant theoretical shift in sociolinguistics, moving beyond the realm of the speech community to that of the speaking subject. This theoretical move, which translated into an analysis of speakers' language repertoire, offers invaluable access to migrants 'pathways of mobility'. An analysis of some repertoires inscribes speakers in the history of their communicative acts and social encounters, as well as of their movements across both physical and social spaces. Focusing on language repertoire is also a way for us to move away from the methodological nationalism that has plagued migration studies.

In this presentation, I illustrate why pathways of mobility must be taken into account in order to understand the shaping of migrants' language ideologies and practices. My analysis rests on ethnographic data of contemporary transcontinental African migrants who relocated to Cape Town, South Africa. I show that the factors usually invoked in the literature to explain migrants' contrasting language ideologies are not always relevant. These include their patterns of socialization within the host country, cultural capital, and length of migration, among others. I argue that many of my informants' language representations were formed before their relocation into South Africa, during their complex geographic and social trajectories, which for some had spanned over several years.

I conclude that these findings have significant theoretical consequences as they unsettle our common understanding of migration as involving points of departure (often the country of origin) and of arrival (the host country). It also prompts us to revisit our discourse on migrants, whose analytical relevance rarely exists before they set foot in the host country and the latter become the only setting according to which we sociolinguists make sense of their practices.

Keywords: transnationalism, mobility, migration, language practice, ideology

3. Transnational Hong Kong: The stories of places, times, and people

Dr. Katherine Chen
University of Macau

This paper presents stories of Hong Kong people who are in transition at one point or another in the spacetime dimension. Jo, a UK-born daughter of Hong Kongers who made her way back "home" in the 1990s with her parents but does not feel that she fits in anywhere. Sam, a Hong Kong-born son who migrated with his parents to Canada in the 1990s, and returned to Hong Kong in 2010s despite his parents' disapproval. Paul, an Indonesian-born ethnic Chinese who migrated from Indonesia to China in the 1960s, and then to Hong Kong in the 1970s, who made Hong Kong home but longed for the imagined Southeast Asian home. They all ended up in Hong Kong in the present. Through discourse analysis of their autobiographical narratives, this paper explores how the nexus of chronotope, people, and ideologies of language shape the ideological frame of one's and others' identities, be it imagined, perceived, or stated on the multiple institutional identity documents they literally possess. In another perspective, this paper co-develops with the consultants how they make sense of the worlds they are in across different timespace with different people. This paper is part of a long-term ethnographic and multilingualism research on two groups of transnationals in Hong Kong conducted since the 2000s. Namely, Indonesian Chinese who migrated to Hong Kong, and returned Hong Kong Chinese migrants who once lived in Anglophone countries. Data include recording of natural spontaneous multilingual speech of everyday life both in Hong Kong and where the transnationals return from or travel to visit, and ethnographic interviews and shadowing across a few years in different stages of the transnationals' lives.

Keywords: transnationalism, autobiographical narratives, chronotope, ideologies, identity

4. Assembling English

Dr. Beatriz Lorente
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The ideological link between language and nation has always played an important role in the commodification of language, especially when it comes to making claims about the authenticity and legitimacy of the product. This linking between language and nation has been particularly central to and has been reinforced by the language teaching industry which has relied on particular imaginaries of native-speaking countries and native-speakers, and which has economically relied on historically structured transnational flows of 'non-native' language learners heading to 'native' speaking countries, and of 'native' speaking teachers heading to 'non-native' speaking countries. This paper situates itself in the changing landscape of the English language teaching industry where there appears to be intensifying competition between English schools or programs located in 'native' English speaking countries (e.g. the United States) and those located in 'non-native' English countries (e.g. the Philippines) for transnational flows of 'non-native' English language learners. This paper traces the rise of the English language teaching industry in the Philippines, in particular, in the city of Baguio. Using the case of an English language school in Baguio City that caters to English language learners from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, this paper examines how - in the everyday discourses and practices of the teachers and students - English is (dis)assembled into a transnational space that is rooted and entangled in a multiplicity of trajectories, temporalities and rationalities (see Mbembe, 2011). This has implications for how the ideological link between language and nation is framed especially within the changing contours of the English language teaching industry.

Keywords: transnationalism, nation, language ideology

5. Transnationalism, gender, and language: Between social structures and social imaginaries

Dr. Mi-Cha Flubacher
University of Vienna

Taking a critical sociolinguistic perspective, this contribution will propose a discussion of transnationalism on the basis of the notion "gendered geographies of power"(Pessar & Mahler 2003: 812), which focuses on "the role of the state and the social imaginary in gendering transnational processes and experiences". These geographies of power result in affordances and/or constraints of both migrants and non-migrants along gendered social axes on different scales and locations. Expanding this notion, I propose to introduce language, which serves particularly to understand the structuring effects in today's Europe, which is experiencing a veritable language-mania for regulating entry, residence, and employment. To exemplify this, I will draw on a case study of the Thai community in Vienna, which is strikingly gendered, due both to migration restrictions, reserving entry for spouses or highly qualified professionals from third-countries, and, on a different scale, to global post-colonial marriage patterns.

Part of this feminized community regularly meets for an open-air picnic, doubling as an informal market for Thai foods, drinks and massages. It is embedded in a popular recreational area in Vienna and open to anyone. Understanding this as a location in which collective and individual issues of transnational identity, materiality and imagination intermesh, several questions emerge: How does the social structure impact on this localized scale, i.e. the restrictive national language regime? How, then, is this location interactionally and linguistically shaped? And, finally, could this location be understood as a point of resistance to the (e.g. linguistically) regulated labour market? As a conclusion, I will argue that a focus on language regimes and language practices related to community activities will allow transnational studies to gain a deeper and more nuanced insight into the structuring and regulating processes positioned at different scales.

Pessar, P. & Mahler, S. 2003. Transnational migration: Bringing gender in. IMR 37(3). 812-846.

Keywords: transnationalism, gender, sociolinguistics, Thai community, Vienna

6. Ideologies of language, race, and Korean beauty on YouTube

Dr. Elaine Chun
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Korean beauty (K-beauty) videos on YouTube play an important role in a highly profitable South Korean beauty industry, and they have contributed to an increasingly recognizable transnational discourse of feminine beauty in recent years. For example, since 2015, one of the most popular K-beauty icons, Park Hye-Min (known as "Pony"), has created over 120 videos, 80 of which have over one million views. Notably, K-beauty videos circulate across a complex linguistic space. Although many are performed in the Korean language, they are often accessible to a diverse linguistic audience through subtitling, most commonly but not exclusively in English. In addition, an increasing number of videos are created by English speakers, and a transnational audience of viewers/consumers respond with comments in various languages.

My analysis specifically focuses on how Korean and English lexical items that describe the skin—primarily its color and texture—come to circulate as recognizable signs that racialize the material body, and how such items, through their associations and contrasts, come to regiment transnational ideologies of race and feminine beauty. Specifically, I look across 10 videos produced by Korean and Korean American women who speak Korean, English, or both, examining how both video creators and viewers invoke 'Korean' terms (hayahta ('white'), balkta ('bright'), chokchokhada ('moist'), jayeonseureopta ('natural')), 'English' terms (white, light, bright, glowy, dewy, natural), and bivalent terms (geullowi, nachurel, hwaiteu) to describe the skin of video creators, video viewers, and imagined racialized figures. Specifically, I examine how these concepts encounter challenges of translatability as they move across three discourse contexts: the speech of the video creator, the standardized closed captions and subtitles, and the numerous written comments by a transnational audience. My analysis explores the specific ways in which linguistic negotiations of K-beauty terminology across these contexts sometimes challenge but also inevitably naturalize their racializing implications.

Keywords: race, Korean, English, transnationalism, social media

7. Language as care: Material, ideological, and indexical dimensions of transnational life

Dr. Lynnette Arnold
UMass Amherst

Interdisciplinary research on transnationalism has long been concerned with care, defined broadly as providing for others. Care fundamentally sustains human life, but the labor of care is often distributed along gendered, racialized, and classed lines in ways that are inevitably tied to global political-economic inequalities. In this paper, I suggest that scholars of language and social life can make important contributions to transnationalism research by conceptualizing language as a form of care. This approach emerges from the investigation of communication within transnational communities; in particular, I draw on my own multisited ethnographic research with cross-border families living stretched between El Salvador and the United States.

Reconceptualizing language as care demonstrates that the material, ideological, and indexical dimensions of language are simultaneously at work in transnationalism. Language as care is most obviously material as it serves to facilitate other modalities of care. However, among the transnational families in my study, language is mobilized as itself a material force, a means of enacting care by sustaining relationships of obligation across borders. As it facilitates and enacts care, language also functions ideologically to formulate understandings of what actions – carried out by whom, in which circumstances – count as care. Attending to how language signifies care traces how specific imaginaries of care are produced and mobilized. Of course, most understandings of what counts as care are not explicitly formulated but rather emerge through the indexical dimension of language, wherein particular ways of using language stand in for valorized notions of care.

I contend that conceptualizing language as care brings sociolinguistics more centrally into transnationalism research, making clear the multiple entanglements of language with the social processes whereby cross-border relationships are produced and sustained. This reconceptualization simultaneously demonstrates how transnational research can reinvigorate sociolinguistic scholarship by shedding new light on what language can accomplish.

Keywords: care, family, migration, ethnography, Latin America