

Book Review

A. Pennycook and E. Otsuji. 2015. *Metrolingualism. Language in the city.* New York: Routledge. ISBN. 205 pp.

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DOI 10.1515/multi-2015-0069

This book contributes to current sociolinguistic debates that see a need for new concepts in language and linguistics as, due to intense forms of mobility, “the connection between a speech community and a set of established, and shared, forms of knowledge of languages and of language norms must be questioned” (Blommaert and Dong 2010: 382). A central aim in this is to overcome ‘numerative’ strategies of language and *Metrolingualism* grounds the endeavour of studying linguistic practice anew on space, understood as a socially constructed category. The theoretically engaging text puts into focus the interrelationships of linguistic repertoires and local spaces, where both are regarded as dialectically emerging from each other. The author’s interest in diverse linguistic spaces makes them choose cities as prime analytical focus for their enterprise and, inspired by Maher’s *metroethnicity* (Maher 2005), call their take on language and space *metrolingualism*.

The not-too-easy to grasp concept aims at opening up “a way of thinking about multilingualism centred around the everyday use of mobile linguistic resources in relation to urban space” (p. 4). It wants to give access to “grounded accounts of language users, where multilingualism is not merely a plurality of languages but rather a creative space of language making, where rules and boundaries are crossed and changed” (p. 16). Pennycook and Otsuji base their account of heterogeneous spaces of language making on ethnographic observation, conversational data and qualitative interviews, conducted in various informal, economically-framed spaces within cities – markets, kitchens, lunch breaks of construction workers – and make visible often neglected contexts of multilingual language practice. A weakly defined concept of the city and inconsistent argumentations regarding its role make a repeated emphasis on the *urban* in parts nebulous and one wonders whether it is at all relevant for the stimulating theoretical approach presented. Overall, the book offers surprising perspectives and will inspire new lines of thought on links between language use, space, and everyday culture. Concepts like *spatial repertoire* – the repertoire of all resources available in a particular place – or of *rhythms* – the changes in spatial repertoires that depend on the time of the day, week, year or historic era – will surely arouse new and exciting sociolinguistic research.

Each of the eight chapters begins with ethnographic insights and ends with an exploration of methodology. The first chapter introduces key concepts via inspections of interactions in a Sydney market, where resources from different *languages* – a concept that seems indeed difficult to overcome, as the transcription conventions in the text confirm – come into play. The authors assume regularities in terms of language structure, functions and activities not to be *a priori* but argue that “[i]t is the emergent and sedimented regularities of metrolingual practices that provide coherence” (p. 20). They illustrate the ordinariness of diversity as an instance of globalization and multilingualism ‘from below’ and discuss “interrelationships between language practices, spatial relations and getting things done” (p. 4). This involves the study of how objects play a mediating role in interaction (here: zucchinis!), which epitomises the concept of metrolingual practice that comprises people, space and objects. We are introduced to “practices of buying, selling, ordering, stacking” (p. 9) (but not to, for example, practices of defining, deciding, governing – it is noticeable that the observed spaces are very much at the lower end of the economic hierarchy). A discussion of Derrida’s *monolingualism of the Other* (*Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne*) as a general condition of language elaborates on the modernist ideological foundations of enumerative approaches to language.

The second chapter presents ethnic and linguistic ties within cities as constantly developing and changing in line with economic, social, political and spatial conditions. Although they are not pre-given, ethnic affiliations often continue to shape social networks and therefore language practices. These networks are temporal and “criss-cross the city, from markets, to shops, to restaurants and homes, and the historical background that links ethnic minorities to particular products.” (p. 38). The authors here elaborate on their interest in the city, which is not intended to be in opposition to the rural but is chosen due to cities’ quantitative intensity of diversity. The city as a spatial concept is not analysed at this point and has a role that is difficult to access as the authors argue, for example, that “[m]etrolingualism as a practice is not confined to the city; it is intended as a broad, descriptive category for understanding language and the city [...]” (p. 34). While, given the research interest choosing cities for empirical research is plausible, using a blend that makes use of the term *metropolis* (whose colonial connotations are never subject to discussion) remains obscure if the concept relates to a *general* condition of language.

Chapter three starts with a critique of numerative strategies in linguistics and develops interesting perspectives on language practices in space as inter-linked with patterns of time. The ‘rhythms’ of the city make the spaces of the city

and these go in line with (here: capitalistically-ruled) time slots. The traffic of people and objects due to commuting, lunch-breaks and shop-opening hours co-constitutes the constantly changing language practices in particular places that are changing according to different times of the day and according to larger time-frames, as weeks, months, years or decades. This illustrates the dynamic and holistic view on language that the authors propose and the concept of ‘rhythms’ surely will inspire new research projects.

The fourth chapter introduces the notion of ‘spatial repertoire’, which conceptualises the “communicative activity of particular places” (p. 86) as the central locus of the emergence of repertoires. It argues that “[s]ocial interaction is not merely a collision of individual trajectories but the spatial organization of semiotic resources and the semiotic organization of space” (p. 85). Insights into talk in restaurant kitchens open interesting views on multilingual and multi-modal communicative practices that show that there is no need to ‘overcome’ diversity, in all its possible facets. Otsuji and Pennycook here argue for a ‘linguaging’ approach claiming that “perhaps it is not so much about ‘which language’ is being used but what things are getting done with what language use.” (p. 73). Of crucial interest are the links between individual repertoires, emerging in interaction, and the respective local spatial repertoires.

In the fifth chapter, “tensions between the conviviality of [metro]lingual encounters and the labelling and naming of difference” (p. 93) are in focus. Interview data demonstrates how speakers often construct linguistic and ethnic differences as essential, even though, at least in this Australian context, attitudes towards them are positive. The examples show how everyday racism is entrenched in the discourses and language uses of conviviality, which leads to a discussion of notions of fluidity and fixity that are in a dialectal and spiral relationship to each other (p. 100). Another crucial aspect that is here shown to impact on the way people and space interact is the division between ‘private’ and ‘public’. Due to an imprecise grasp of this opposition, which is central in sociological debates on late capitalism (see e.g. Bauman 2000), shopping malls, prime examples of the privatisation of public space, are characterised as ‘public’ (p. 101). Bits and pieces of anti-gentrification discourse in this section are in an uneasy relationship to a depiction of shop-owners replacing “shoplifters and junkies” to turn a particular part of Sydney into a “family-friendly space” (p. 103) – a line of argumentation that is central in capitalist gentrification discourse and may be not exactly what Harvey means by the “collective power to reshape processes of urbanization” (quoted on p. 103). Institutional actors – community councils, public transportation systems or global real estate investors – are not part of the discussion and indeed are not at the centre of interest in studying the local metrolingual practices of individuals. Yet, one

could argue that the struggle over power and meaning in city spaces is not only a local and face-to-face issue. An interaction of the local and tangible, the administrative and political (which, after all, defines the spatial borders of districts and cities, which hopefully remain more than a conglomeration of shopping malls, markets and restaurants) and the transnational economic realm (as for example real estate investors) is maybe at the heart of ‘contested cities’ and their complex and constantly changing language practices.

Chapter 6 returns to material objects and discusses the connection between food and language in talk about and around food in the workplace. Food is a literally essential part of everyday life and has interesting interrelationships to constructions of ethnicity. The chapter gives examples of how linguistic and material resources interact to create spatial repertoires. A so far little considered aspect in sociolinguistics is that negotiations of meaning can also fail or be only partially successful, as a conversation about ‘red celery’ (that turns out to be rhubarb), making use of resources from Japanese, French and English, demonstrates. The authors discuss how things are re-appropriated and given new, often ‘ethnic’ meanings during their trajectories of mobility, which however, do not depend on the ‘originality’ of either material objects nor of their producers. The chapter ends with a methodological note on how authentic interaction – in short, *participant* observation – allows for insights into communicative practices that would otherwise be impossible to obtain.

Chapter 7 treats what has been called linguistic landscape elsewhere with here focusing on its historical and dynamic nature in describing it as “the layering of the city, the city as palimpsest as different texts in different languages are written over each other as the populations of different areas change.” (p. 137). The chapter elaborates on the particular historical role of cities, presenting some rather universalist claims like “[t]he growth of the city has been central to the development of humans” (p. 141). It is unclear what is here meant by ‘development’ (capitalist advance? intellectual diversity? population density? environmental pollution?). The authors discuss changing ethnically and class-stratified settlement patterns that lead to different types of public signage. They do so with elegant moves from, for example, Tokyo to London, which gives the book at parts a really global feel, where, however, the global south remains mostly invisible. The chapter gives examples of older cases of diversity as to say that cities (only?) have always been diverse and ends with an illuminating view on how social networks span across urban space and potentially connect to other places. The beautiful example of the ‘Japanese cucumber network’ – the network of people involved in growing, selling and buying a particular kind of cucumber – shows how objects are co-responsible for human and therefore linguistic relations.

The final chapter discusses the ‘market value’ of diverse individual language repertoires and whether and how these repertoires become part of particular spatial repertoires to form *metrolingual francas*. There is a more extensive addressing of societal hierarchies in this chapter – why is it that the multilingual practices of workers are not accorded much value in economic terms? The authors argue that as to understand local values, we need to think in terms of the “constellation of language practices, local economies, gender relations, discrimination and types of work that lead to the ways in which language practices gain value” (p. 167). This leads to the notion of *metrolingua francas*, which are understood as language repertoires that always and necessarily emerge from very local spatial conditions. Languages are here no longer modernist objects but linguistic practices that draw on available spatial repertoires, which are “a constantly emerging [...] set of linguistic possibilities” (p. 177). The ‘language’ that we see here is “never fixed, stable or shared but rather sets of linguistic and non-linguistic resources” (p. 177). The concept of the *metrolingua franca* aspires to access the human ability to communicate by verbal means in a new and more holistic way.

Concerning the overall impact of this for language pedagogies, discussed at the end of the chapter, the authors suggest that “an emerging goal of education may be less towards mythical native-speaker-like users of mythical languages and more towards resourceful metrolingual speakers who draw on multiple semiotic resources and are good at accommodating, negotiating and being light on their feet and loose with their tongues” (p. 182). Writing from colonial centres with presumably well-paid jobs, achieved on the basis of the ability to use highly technical and standardised Anglo-English, it is not exactly clear what is meant. While it is certainly true that we should prepare students to ‘integrat[e] their own semiological activities with those of their interlocutor’ (Harris, quoted on p. 182), arguing against acquiring the “fixed codes of schooled multilingualism” (p. 183) seems to imply the assumption that the social power of standardised codes is declining. The language used to present this thought does not seem to confirm this.

As a whole the book, despite some opaque and some negligent passages, is a stimulating contribution with adventurous explorations of unexpected paths and unknown territories. It develops a holistic theoretical contribution to grasp language as an activity that is embedded in spatial, material and social conditions of which it simultaneously is an effect. Whether or not we want to call this metrolingual may be a matter of taste but will probably be avoided in some discourses. As a final remark, I think that caution is required as to not depict as emancipatory what has the potential of being a tacit companion to neoliberalism. Who profits from metrolingual and non-standard competences? Yes,

standard languages are an outcome of particular modernist histories but in flexibilised global markets they remain very powerful gatekeepers of social mobility and it may not be accidental that the empirical research for this book took place in construction sites and restaurant kitchens. It may be worth pondering the potentials but also threats of non-public, non-officially governed and non-standardised practices (see Bauman 2000). In contrast to an era of critical theory, as Bauman argues, it is no longer the invasion of the public into the private that threatens emancipation but rather the privatisation of public life. What is linguistic emancipation where it is not the public – standardising – state that is an oppressive force but private, flexible, capitalist, decentralised regimes of power (that place responsibilities on the individual, that instrumentalise states and their educational systems, that do not have the formation of community as an aim and see language merely under aspects of efficiency).

To sum up: the mobility and flexibility of identification which characterize the 'shopping around' type of life are not so much vehicles of *emancipation* as the instruments of *redistribution of freedoms*. They are for that reason mixed blessings – enticing and desired as much as repelling and feared, and arousing most contradictory sentiments. (Bauman 2000: 90).

References

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