

Repertoire management and structural change: Toward an activity-based theory of language contact

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Recently the concept of ‘translanguaging’ has been gaining ground among post-structuralist sociolinguists aiming to take a critical stance toward the traditional view of ‘languages’ as self-contained systems with clear boundaries, and to capture the volatility that characterises the way in which multilingual speakers deploy elements of their linguistic repertoire in actual communication (cf. Garcia & Li Wei 2014 for a summary of relevant discussions). This approach draws on notions such as Grosjean’s (2001) ‘bilingual mode’ and on work by neurolinguists who have questioned the presence of any clear neuro-physiological bulk separation of languages in the brain. Historical linguists and typologists, however, have taken little notice either of these conceptual developments or of the experimental findings that accompany them. There remains a view among many specialists that languages are ‘systems’ of structures that are permeable in almost random ways as long as social norms offer a licence for structural innovation (cf. most recently Seifart 2017), but give little or no consideration to the susceptibility to contact-induced change of particular categories, or to the role of those categories in oral communication. In my presentation I draw on the framework developed in Matras (2009) for an integrative model of language contact that links bilingual speech performance, speech production and innovation, to the cognitive function of structural categories in processing speech, and their resulting susceptibility to change, which is evidenced by the overall hierarchical nature of category volatility in language contact situations. I argue that language change has its roots and triggers in communication as an activity in which users engage, and that in bilingual settings, managing the complex repertoire of linguistic structures is an integral part of that activity.

References

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