

Linguistic responses to plurisocial environments

Mark Donohue

The Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages

This talk examines different performances of multilingualism in three parts of the world, showing that the fluent multilingualism can proceed differentially, and asymmetrically, in different situations where more than one society interacts frequently and extensively.

Different contact situations elicit different linguistic responses from the communities concerned. At the most minimal, there can be no linguistic effects, and at the most extreme we might see complete language shift. The basis of any form of contact-initiated language change rests in some level of multilingualism. This talk presents the responses to multilingualism in three different contact areas, each of which exemplifies (and can only be explained by) high levels of multilingualism on the part of at least one of the communities in question.

The three case studies are: language change on Hainan; language adaptation in northern Nepal; and language ideologies in northern New Guinea. On Hainan we have a situation where languages from several language families have co-existed for centuries or millenia. Intense contact has led to intense, high-level multilingualism that persists to this day. Multilingualism has been so prevalent for so long that the same chain of sound changes ($*t^h > h$, $*t > t^h$, and $*s > t$) have applied to the native lexicon in several of the language families of the island. In the Nubri valley of northern Nepal we find situation of asymmetrical multilingualism, where speakers of the non-dominant languages, Samdo and Kuke, must be able to speak the socially dominant language, Nubri. The ways in which these speakers speak Nubri, which itself has shown levels of contact-induced change in response to both Tibetan and Nepali, reveals a strong ideology about what bilingualism requires, with little adaptation in terms of lexical choices being evidenced in non-first language speech. Finally, the West Wapei languages of northern New Guinea are a typologically very close subgroup of Torricelli languages, with similar phonologies and very similar morphosyntactic profiles. They are very different from the languages to the north, west, south, and east, and most of the languages concerned perform a consistent identity that unites the region, in a very symmetrical way (an ideology that is reflected in marriage patterns and ceremonial relationships). When speaking to persons from a different village, we find authoritative, but often inaccurate, use of different lexemes, but a poor performance in terms of using appropriate bound morphology, frequently seeing correspondence mimicry over-applied to form words, and case systems employing the right forms used in the wrong functions. Examining both oral communication and slit-gong messaging reveals how the ideology of shared identity leads to much less functional multilingualism than is commonly claimed.

The social milieu in which these three contact situations occur are very different, and might be responsible for the different approaches to multilingualism. I will attempt to form a very preliminary typology of social contacts and linguistic responses.