

Proposal submission for presentation

Hunter-gatherer multilingualism: Asymmetric semantic interaction in Jedek-Jahai (Aslian, Austroasiatic) bilinguals in a small-scale egalitarian setting in northern Peninsular Malaysia

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Muysken's (2013) framework of bilingual optimization strategies sets out to create a typology of multilingual settings and the role that different features of settings (including social factors, perceived language distance, and processing constraints) play in producing different bilingual outcomes. The framework reminds us that the micro-dynamics of multilingualism lie in the language contact that occurs in the minds of multilingual individuals. We test the predictions of the framework for bilingual semantic interaction in Jedek-Jahai bilinguals in the small-scale, non-standardized, egalitarian, multilingual setting of Rual in northern Peninsular Malaysia. Rual is a resettlement site established in the 1970s, comprising of six Jedek- and Jahai-speaking (Northern Aslian, Austroasiatic) bands of hunter-gatherers (Yager & Burenhult, 2017). The cultural setting of Northern Aslian-speaking groups (known ethnographically as the Semang) is characterized by high individual mobility, band exogamy, high levels of idiolectal variation and multilingualism, and a complex network of contact between groups (Benjamin, 1985).

How does multilingualism play out in egalitarian hunter-gatherer settings? A large number of studies have found evidence that the languages of bi- and multilingual individuals are not separate but tend to interact with one another. But the bulk of these studies look at Western, standardized settings and speakers of large-scale languages. We know much less about the outcomes of bi-/multilingualism in non-Western settings where speech communities are small, multilingual, and egalitarian, where the languages spoken are non-standardized and in contact long term, and where speakers are non-literate and no formal acquisition is involved. We investigate bilingual semantic interaction in the Rual setting in two studies. In Yager & Gullberg (in press), we investigate the domain of topological relations descriptions. Two groups of bilingual speakers of Jedek and Jahai and two groups of monolingual Jedek and Jahai speakers described the Topological Relations Picture Series (Bowerman & Pedersen, 1992) in a director-matcher task, the bilinguals completing the task in both Jedek and Jahai. The study reported in Yager (in progress) extends the analysis into the linguistic domain of verbs, in the semantic domain of placement event descriptions. Two groups of bilingual speakers of Jedek and Jahai and two groups of monolingual Jedek and Jahai speakers described the film clips of the PUT task (Bowerman, Gullberg, Majid & Narasimhan, 2004) in a director-matcher task, the bilinguals completing the task in both Jedek and Jahai. Results suggest asymmetric semantic interaction in the bilinguals as compared to the monolinguals, with bidirectional influences in the Jahai-identifying bilinguals and a unidirectional influence of Jedek on Jahai in the Jedek-identifying bilinguals. The specific pattern of semantic interaction among Jedek-Jahai bilinguals at Rual is in line with the predictions of Muysken's framework, suggesting that it has potential in guiding our predictions about the outcomes of multilingualism in a diverse range of settings.

References

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