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Language in strange and familiar places: A short introduction

Abstract: Liminality can be made productive for linguistics in two ways: on the one hand, we aim to explore liminal uses of language by explicitly turning the gaze to the familiar, the seemingly banal, and the average, demonstrating that liminality in language practice is common and usual. On the other hand, we intend to highlight the importance of previously marginalized language concepts and theories, focusing on the aspects of linguistics, and specifically, anthropological linguistics, as a science of liminality. By bringing together contributions on language in strange and familiar places, a collection of articles emerges in this volume that will be of interest to a wide audience, reaching beyond linguistics.

Keywords: Liminality, traces, marginalized linguistic theories

At the intersection of language and place there is much to overlook. Found too trivial in its everyday contexts to be of any import for further explorations, and being half forgotten in the dusty corners of our existences, language located at mundane, banal, and sometimes almost invisible places often gets ignored in the ways we study its social and cultural roles. And thus in a vibrant field such as anthropological linguistics, the impact of path-breaking work such as Augé's (1992) introduction to supermodernity with its plea for an anthropology of proximity remained relatively modest. Rather than turning to our own immediate environments, to the banal and trivial of everyday life, where we could critically examine our assumptions about what "language" (other than its named, fixated, and normed representations) might actually be, we rather tended to focus on other projects. Yet, we can learn from research on the traces language leaves behind in the strange and familiar places everywhere around us that these places are the locations of amazement, play, liminality. They are the sites where language is contingent and magical, and where we can thrive in the liminal realm in-between. In this volume, we set out to explore language in strange and familiar places from a perspective in anthropological linguistics in order to illustrate the close relationship between what we deem to be "under control" and what is surprising and alive. We thereby also create approaches to an integrated study of the

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111707501-001

interrelationship between language and culture – the subject matter of anthropological linguistics, with regard to those lively places that remain in and around the non-places of supermodernity (Augé 1992), the industrialized sites of a dystopian present (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015) and throughout the colonized, terraformed world (Ghosh 2021).

Our volume is therefore also a critique of some trends in linguistics as well as an invitation to others. It is a truism that language and place are intimately connected: depending on where we are, what the context is, and what our aims are, we will adjust our language accordingly. Yet linguistics defines itself by a rigid framework that determines what kind of language is worth investigating. Within that framework, linguistics constructs both language and place in multiple ways: language as a sequestered thing and structure belongs to the field site, the classroom, the archive, etc.; language as fluid practice is associated with the street, markets, and other such potentially chaotic places; language as reconstruction belongs to migration corridors and religious sites. And so on. But what about the places that tend to fall between the cracks? What about language in liminal places, in places that are central yet tend to get overlooked by science? For example: the varieties spoken in the kitchen, the heart of the home (or the cooking area, the heart of the dwelling place), where for thousands of generations we have congregated and which for thousands of generations has been one of our safest places. The place where stories are told, important information is shared, confidences are given. The place where food is prepared, but also where utensils congregate: utensils for food preparation, but also utensils that are being worked on, tools that get repaired in the evenings or winter nights, utensils that get made, textiles that get made, fibres that get prepared, etc. What about language and variation in those intimate, informal settings, where knowledge is transmitted in ways which defy ethnographic description and objectification? In what ways might the sciences of linguistics expand if they direct their attention also to those kinds of places, places that have been deemed worthless as sources of knowledge, yet that are so fundamentally human that they are familiar to us all?

What might linguistics discover in those places that have seemed so banal, so trivial, that they tend to be overlooked – that are, quite simply, so familiar that they have become invisible? What about the language in spaces of waiting, or indefinable limbos, which can allow us peeks into the interplay between place, time, silence, and language? Or the language on building materials, which, albeit often lasting in invisible places, can afford us glimpses of early language concepts and language use? Or the language of urban waste dumps, big or small. And so on. What about three-dimensional language in liminal spaces?

This volume seeks to explore what we can gain from paying attention to all those liminal spaces, the things that tend to fall between the cracks. We take a broad

view of what language is and consequently of what linguistics, the science of language, is. We are thus consciously challenging the boundaries of the framework that our discipline has set in place and experimenting with potential new discoveries.

This volume is intended to make liminality, the space-in-between, that which happens outside the given orders and norms, special for an integrated study of relations between language and culture embodied in anthropological linguistics in two ways: on the one hand, we aim to explore liminal uses of language by explicitly turning the gaze to the familiar, the seemingly banal, and the average, demonstrating that liminality in language practice is common and usual. On the other hand, we intend to highlight the importance of previously marginalized language concepts and theories, focusing on linguistics as a science of liminality. Thus, one of the ways in which the familiar and yet strange language that has fallen through the cracks of disciplinary constructs are explored here is by changing the perspective and in that way becoming a stranger to oneself, to one's language and its sites. This involves not only the question of communicative practices in the zones of everyday liminality, but also in a spiritual context, in the languages of ritual and conversation with the ancestors. These, like language in more mundane liminal spaces, such as kitchen tables and restaurant washrooms, suggest that, in what we call modern linguistics, we often pursue practices and projects that remove us from our own origins, from our shared heritage and personal lives. We tend to construct language as a language of others, avoiding the pronouns "I" and "me" and hiding behind a proofread form of English (or German, or French) that does not differ from that in other articles, volumes, and talks. This may be seen as a strategy to present one's research as being universally meaningful, or to maintain certain power regimes in a postcolonial world. Yet the possibility of listening to voices that sound through the cracks and of exploring language in strange yet familiar contexts always remains. Our manifold relationships with others, who have invited us into their homes and offered us insights into their languages, allow us to think about how well-being is part of these experiences, how healing practices have benefitted these encounters, and how desires about linguistic futures are shared. These experiences offer deep insights into what language becomes to us, beyond the descriptions, documentations, and analyses we produce as linguists.

At the same time, even our own homes can always turn into fields of linguistic enquiry. The built environments we live in are all semiotic landscapes, palimpsests rich in meaning, both of signs that we can read and of opaque language addressing other people, spirits, and beings. Signs and messages appear before our eyes as we walk around cities and towns, on large billboards and in bright colors, or written on the surfaces of bricks and stones that are now hidden inside the walls that surround us. Yet, as the contributions in this collection claim, all of

them continue to be meaningful, to express something, to have forms of agency. Therefore, while the rich interdisciplinary research of the last decades has largely focused on contemporary signs and language practices, this collection is intended to concentrate on those semiotic artefacts and practices that are less visible – and yet deeply relevant.

By doing so, the contributions in this collection will connect to pre-existing approaches to liminality and language, for example as offered in studies on ritual communication (e.g., Senft and Basso 2009), secret language practices (e.g., Storch 2011), language practices of the margins (e.g., Pietikäinen et al. 2016), colonial linguistics and its archives (e.g., Hoffmann 2020), and critical and decolonial creole studies (e.g., Faraclas and Delgado 2021). But at the same time, the contributions seek to provide new perspectives on these fields of investigation, thereby making innovative and original contributions to alternative ways of exploring and theorizing language in its relationship to place.

In turning to liminal and marginalized language practices, to the hidden and forgotten, we prefer to see ourselves as working with traces rather than with remnants of what once was vibrant. The language spoken in liminal spaces, in spiritual and magic contexts, as well as signs and symbols that remain agentive in their hidden spaces, offers itself as a trace of other ontological and epistemic approaches to language and linguistics, but also of the complex lifeworlds in which we exist and their temporality, as Paul Wenzel Geissler (2023) suggests: "Traces include spectacular architectural ruins and trivial everyday objects. Some are attributed potency or beauty; others are considered waste or evoke repulsion. Accordingly, some are overlooked, hidden, or erased, while others are collected, preserved, or turned into monuments". And so is linguistic data and evidence. "Waste" might be language not considered "relevant" for a description or diachronic analysis as it violates ideological constraints of purity and essentialism; it may also be a practice deemed politically problematic or shameful at a given time. The many layers of meaning of whatever gets recorded, written down, and archived in language sciences have their own dynamics, and thus the monuments of linguistics, as well as its rubble and waste, change in how they are interpreted and how they speak to us. Thus, the work of linguists begins in looking at traces, and thereby understanding relationships – between past and present, Self and Other, research and researcher, etc. – and putting all this into new perspectives. In other words, "language" never just "is", and cannot be "itself" of course, but is whatever our perspectives, cognitive interests and ideological approaches make it.

Reflecting on this process, we can develop new and challenging questions and debates on what the "linguistic field" might be (Aikhenvald 2016), how we can express our being-together in that field (Velupillai and Mullay 2024), and how

we can reconstruct processes of ordering, scrubbing and archiving linguistic data (Hollington et al. 2021; Hoffmann 2020), in order to understand what "language" and the "linguistic field" could also have been. What emerges out of this is a laboratory of entanglements, a hospitable space where "normality" – everyday practices and a shared world – becomes the topic of our enquiries, involving not only the language of others, but also our own. This is how language sciences unfold yet another wealth of insight into how we live together and inhabit a world in which we are always entangled with others in time and space. What we get to see is amazing – in these dynamic liminal spaces and these temporarily discarded instances of "language" we find ever emergent social structures, the malleability of orders and boundaries, a picture of change and vibrancy.

The nine contributions to this book, offering a variety of perspectives on this process, come from diverse contexts that all play salient roles in contemporary anthropological linguistics: typology, sociolinguistics, orature studies, comparative linguistics, and language documentation and description. Their authors have all worked empirically on and in linguistic fields in which they have also lived and created relationships. Here, they turn to the familiar yet strange, to the strange yet familiar language practices, histories, narratives, methodologies, and sociologies in these environments.

The first contribution in this collection is R. M. W. Dixon's essay on "The eternal and the ephemeral", in which he takes a deep dive into the religion and ethos of the First Nations of Australia, several of whose languages he has studied throughout his entire professional life. This wealth of experience and insight is the basis for a profound and original analysis of the spiritual ontologies of these languages. What emerges is an understanding of how marginalized spiritual knowledge permeates linguistic thought and work. This is also at the core of the second contribution, Viveka Velupillai's paper on the documentation of Shaetlan, an Indigenous language which pre-dates English in Shetland, the northernmost part of the UK. The "mixed ancestry" of Shaetlan illustrates the deep history of entangled, often very mobile communities speaking Norn and Scots, as well as a variety of Low Country Germanic languages in this part of the world. Through centuries of marginalization and stigmatization, Shaetlan is now in danger of falling out of use. But in those contexts where everyday knowledge is transmitted, such as knowledge about sheep, wool, and knitting, it remains meaningful. It is in these contexts that the use of Shetlaen indexicalizes notions of the home, as well as deep spiritual and historical connections.

Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald turns to these hidden, deeply meaningful realms of language in yet another way by exploring the "unseen" in Tariana and Manambu, two languages she has worked on for decades. Spoken in the Amazon and the Middle Sepik respectively, both languages are connected to realms that reach be-

yond mere geographic coordinates. There are ways of speaking and language practices that point to other possibilities than a merely positivist view of language would suggest, namely that there are places in which the spirits of the dead dwell and from where the deceased continue to connect with the world of the living. As Aikhenvald demonstrates, this does not mean that there is a boundary that keeps these two realms apart; instead, there is a reality in which these languages (and the linguistic research on them) exist, which stretches beyond a dichotomy between "real" and "surreal".

In the following chapter, Hirut Woldemariam Teketel helps us turn our gaze to the decidedly "real" existence of language in a context in which, however, its ephemeral and spiritual nature is very much highlighted. Written data on Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, date back to the 5th century AD; for about a thousand years, Ge'ez has no longer been spoken outside of its liturgical context. However, the language is part of a vibrant social sphere in which it signifies the identity of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its followers, who come from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds. Current political and cultural challenges, projects, and interests, including revitalization work, show that the ways this ancient language is dealt with by various interest groups make the creation of a dichotomy between past and present as unhelpful as the one between real and surreal.

In the following chapter, Éric Mélac, Nicolas Tournadre, and Alexandra Y. Aikhenvald have a different take on agency enshrined in language. They explore how evidentials used with first person pronouns differ from evidentials used with pronouns referring to other persons. The focus is on Tariana and Tukano, from the Vaupés River Basin linguistic area in Amazonia, and on Common Tibetan and Central Ladakhi, two Tibetic languages of the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalayas. Speaking of oneself, here embedded in systems of rich evidential marking, is one of the most ubiquitous purposes we use language for; it is how we construct our homes and places of belonging, expressing our desires and disapproval alike. And yet: where and how are these expressions of the Self grounded?

The idea that there might always be something contingent in whatever we otherwise claim to have under control, for example by narrating something or by expressing future plans, has diverse manifestations: not only the expression of evidence that something has actually happened to or because of us, but also the expression of our desire to know what the future holds in store for us belong here. In his study on the "Ideological and communicative perspectives of soothsaying amongst the people of northern Ghana", Asangba Reginald Taluah explores the everyday practice of often complex rituals that aim at controlling destinies, foretelling futures, and resolving problems. Besides language practices such

as the use of a particular register, or working with repetition, mimicry, gestures, and other non-verbal signs and symbols, soothsaying involves rich material culture and a specific way of dealing with space and time. What emerges is a picture of language where nothing is ever spared from the unforeseen, and nothing is ever trivial.

Christina Flora, Petros Karatsareas, Vally Lytra, and Giulia Pepe take this radical view on language to a random evening at a restaurant. Rather than offering a common sociolinguistic description of the repertoires in use in Greek and Italian restaurants in London, they explore how food, language, space, researchers, and research outsiders all interact and shape that what was initially framed as "the research". In highlighting the contingency inherent in their own work, and the complex entanglements and dynamics in what is both the site of a research project and an everyday experience and environment, they offer new and original understandings of "food talk", which here helps migrants to do identity work against the backdrop of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, because both researchers and researched are involved in the complex interactions this involves, the boundaries between them get blurred and "research" becomes conceivable in all its contingency itself.

Migrant food and restaurants are also the topic of the following paper. Anna Charalambidou, Christina Flora, Petros Karatsareas, and Vally Lytra turn our gaze to yet another crack in the wall. In their contribution on "Making and selling Greek food in London", they demonstrate how a simple kebab leads to reflections on Greek in Cyprus and in Greece, on diverse and contested ideas of heritage and identity. Traces of crisis and disruption are confronted with and embedded in present experiences of crisis, not only in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also of the wider neoliberal context of the food market, amid free competition, the gig economy, and gentrification.

The collection of papers ends with a contribution by Anne Storch, who explores roof tiles. Like other migrant workers, and people leading mobile lives, roof tile makers (as well as brickmakers) were often socially marginalized. Old, handmade roof tiles often bear inscriptions that illustrate how they reflected upon their situation, referring to themselves as "almost slaves", complaining about not being properly paid, or cursing a violent landlord. Other traces they left behind include obscene language and drawings, and images and notes about daily life, as well as magical and religious symbols and language. Many decorated roof tiles of the early modern period, and sometimes well into the beginning of the industrial age, allow for an insight into marginalized language practices, such as transgressive language and multilingual practices.

We could go on and on. All the random inscriptions on monuments and walls in public spaces – signs and symbols of magical house protection, hidden curses

and blessings – all the extraordinary and amazing insights that everyday practices hold in store for us. What a fascinating field, and what a lovely way of appreciating linguistics as a profession! Luckily, more remains to be done.

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