

Language on the Edge of the Global: Linguistic Practices, Agency, and the Complexity of the Local

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Abstract:

The last decade has witnessed a burgeoning of interest among sociolinguists in the effects of globalization on linguistic practices around the world. Works on these questions have tended to treat speech communities as homogeneous entities, in which shifts in language use affect everyone in similar fashion through, for example, the increasing prominence of hegemonic languages like English. In addition, works that focus on the theme generally represent small-scale societies on the edge of the global as vulnerable recipients of the workings of globalization, and the relationship between globalization and language as being a one-way process in which globalization affects linguistic practices (e.g., by endangering small-scale languages), rather than focusing on how linguistic practices actively engage with global dynamics.

This presentation argues for a more nuanced approach to the workings of globalization on language and to the role of language in globalization. Basing myself on the analysis of ethnographic and linguistic materials from the Kingdom of Tonga, a small-scale Pacific Island society that is both deeply traditionalistic and intricately connected to the rest of the world, I demonstrate that new uses of the global language, English, are unevenly distributed among interactors. Alternative uses of English and Tongan are the object of complex intersubjective negotiations in daily life, in which individual linguistic competence in fact plays a surprisingly minor role. Language practices (code switching, accent, syntax, etc.) maps onto both new and old patterns of inequality in the society, and have become intricately intertwined with local power dynamics, demonstrating that the local acquires complexity through exposure to the global.

The materials demonstrate that agents in small-scale societies on the edge of the global actively engage with changing linguistic and interactional repertoires. The relationship between global dynamics and linguistic practices is a two-way process: globalization certainly affect linguistic practices, but users of these changing practices also utilize them to define and critique the local relevance of the global. More abstractly, globalization can both reproduce existing socio-economic disparities in local situations and produce new ones. An analysis of naturalistic communicative practices in their social context can provide an important analytic window onto the working of globalization that affect everyone in all societies, large-scale and small-scale.