Kaleidoscopes of Indexicality – The Multiplex Symbolic Functions of Language in Contexts of Unfocused Categories

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Research on multilingualism, superdiversity and belonging so far predominantly focuses on data from Western urban contexts. However, ‘minority and majority language communities in the states of the politico-economic “north” or politico-economic metropole are now intersecting in ways that we have long observed as students of the peripheries of colonial expansion, of empire, and of globalization.’ (Silverstein 2015:7). In this presentation I introduce data from an ethnographic study on language ideologies on an island in the Caribbean Sea off the Belizean coast. Due to its colonial history, contested nation-hood, geographical location, ethnic diversity and its role as tourist hub, this ‘periphery’ place offers an intricate linguistic make-up with ideal conditions to study the indexical functions of languages where we cannot rely on a priori social belonging.

I focus on the complex role of Belizean Creole, an English-lexified Creole, and symbolising ‘Belizeanness’ and serving as oral lingua franca (see also Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) in the highly multilingual, officially English-speaking country, where Spanish is demographically dominant. We may expect it to be central that Belizean Creole is a non-codified, oral code, intertwined with histories of slavery at the lower end of a racial and economic hierarchy. Constructions of Creole as ‘broken English’ or ‘slang’ are indeed common. Yet, the acquisition of Creole by Hispanic, Maya, Asian and North American populations demonstrates its prestigious social status. Informants have mostly positive attitudes towards Creole, irrespective of their ethnic background, their home language use and their potentially negative attitudes towards the ethnic Creole population. The colonial history of Belize, an Afro-European Anglocentric political elite, a bilateral struggle with Guatemala, which is linked to the contested nature of Belize as a nation, the overall Hispanic environments, transnational ties to the US and Jamaica in terms of history, popular culture, migration networks, media and economic relations, and the informalisation of written language culture in an age of transnational social media all contribute to the prestige of Creole.

A grounded theory-inspired analysis of interview and observational data illustrates how discourses on ethnic belonging, national identity, social stratification, racial hierarchies, ideologies of writing and orality, the construction of territorial space, and the transnational/local tourist economy interact and intersect with locally available language ideologies. Indexical functions of language, as they are interwoven with complex and sometimes contradictory social discourses, can have simultaneous and paradoxical meanings. This does not mean, however, that people meander in meaningless social mirror cabinets. We can clearly see how categories on social division and linguistic difference are important signposts and that the nation remains a crucial symbolic entity. Yet, we must be prepared to understand social and linguistic categories as having multiplex, shifting and potentially antithetical indexical meanings. As modernist expectations on clear-cut boundaries and essences are not met (and may have always been imaginations of Western epistemologies), this brings to the fore differential ontologies of knowledge (Derrida 1974), which may be relevant in understanding indexical meaning of language in general.