Editorial

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The materiality of languages in engagements with the environment

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Abstract: Communication, an apparently intangible practice, does in fact affect the way people engage with their social worlds in very material ways. Inspired by both ethnographic and archival-driven research, this special issue aims to fill the gap in studies of language materiality by addressing entanglements with other-than-human agencies. The contributions of this special issue on verbal and non-verbal communicative practices among Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in the Global North and the South interpret language materiality as practice- and process-oriented, performative, and embodied relations between humans and other-than-human actors. The articles cover three major sub-themes, which ostensibly intertwine to a greater or lesser degree in all the works: (in-)visible actors and elements-related language; language materiality narrating and producing sociality; and the emotions and affect of language. The topic of this special issue, the materiality of languages, manifested in multiple engagements with the environment, proves particularly critical at the moment, given the current environmental crisis and the need to comprehend in more depth social relations with numerous other-than-human agencies.

Keywords: environment; Indigenous languages; invisibility; language materiality; social worlds

1 Introduction

This special issue investigates the scholarly notion of “language materiality” as related to diverse social and cultural entanglements between humans and other-than-human actors. By addressing the notion of “language materiality” beyond the human, our aim has been to consider how social relations, entanglements, and

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co-existences between humans and other-than-humans, are experienced in diverse contexts and manifested in verbal and non-verbal communication. We ask whether employing such a notion through communicative practices, in particular among Indigenous peoples, can help resolve—or at least help get a closer look at—the seemingly impossible task of overcoming the dualism between language and materiality (cf. Irvine 2017; Mika 2016).

We have been especially motivated by thinking of how a given language ecology—that is always dynamic and relational (e.g. Garner 2004; Mühlhäusler 2000)—shapes and is shaped by verbal and non-verbal communication practices. Our focus not only comprises the multiple socio-cultural meaning(s) of verbal and non-verbal communicative practices, but it also brings to the fore the lived experiences of what has been called language. We engage with previous debates on the notion of “language materiality,” which has indeed recently gained new popularity (Burkette 2015; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017; Hull 2003; Keane 2013, to name a few), and our investigation mostly approaches language as a “mode of experiencing the world” (Ochs 1992). This special issue adds perspectives to the emergent field of research on language materiality—an area of expertise that has recently developed and has already taken multiple directions, from semiotic approaches to language ideologies, intertextuality, and so forth (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2017). However, language materiality appears to have only marginally engaged with communicative practices among Indigenous societies and those ethnic minorities which continue to interact with their (ancestral) lands and attempt to regenerate traditional ecological knowledges. Their ontologies and epistemologies include ideas of human-environment entanglements, consequent social world, and values that are more or less explicitly expressed in diverse forms (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Black 2014; Descola 2005).

Our conceptualization of language materiality takes into account other-than-human actors and indicates in what ways language practices—as an expression and a mode of experiencing relations between human and other-than-human agencies—are highly intertwined with the material world and how diverse people dwell in and with it. The core questions we want to address in this special issue are: 1) To what extent do Indigenous narratives, myths, lexicon, grammatical features of a language, and genres of communication affect and become affected by the speaker(s), other-than-human agencies, and their relations? 2) How do Indigenous peoples conceptualize language and its materiality in their practices through embodied and learned skills?

In our special issue, the articles present verbal and non-verbal communicative practices among Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in the Global North and the South. We interpret their language materiality as practice- and process-oriented, performative, and embodied relations between humans and other-than-humans as
well as the environment. When using the term “environment,” we refer to a relational space, not to a separate and independent space from human activities. Rather, we understand that the environment is continuously co-constructed, co-experienced, shared, and entwined in these relations with other-than-human beings. Our focus is to explore how this is manifested in communication. Relating to and dwelling within the land and environment comprises a set of (language) skills and practices (e.g. Battiste and Henderson 2012[2000]; Black 2016; Ingold 2000) that are dynamic and changeable as they transform together with the world and altering forces (Di Giminiani 2018). Those relations are not only manifested in language as a semiotic resource, they also allow for different “modes of experiencing” the world in and through language (Ochs 1992) with other “sentient beings” (Anderson 2000).

Similar to Busch (2015), our understanding of lived experiences of language emphasizes “the intersubjective dimension of language,” implying that human and other-than-human agencies somewhat affect one another in the expression of verbal and non-verbal communication and participation in life. When mentioning other-than-human agencies in this special issue, we refer in particular to entities to whom communication and practices are addressed, such as acknowledging and respecting, or with whom Indigenous peoples often share their experiences. In this sense, this special issue concurs with post-humanist approaches to language that recognize agency in other-than-human entities, and their capacity to act in verbal and non-verbal communicative practices (Pennycook 2018). The emphasis and distinctiveness that our theoretical outcomes stem from evidenced practices among Indigenous societies. Indeed, our acceptance that humans are not “at the centre of their own lives, thinking, making decisions, choosing, acting as free-willed, independent and sovereign subjects” (Pennycook 2018: 33–34; cf. Siragusa 2020) emerges from our long-term research in the field. With the present work going beyond an anthropocentric setting, we show that communicative interactions and co-existences actually blur the boundaries between what is often conceived as material and immaterial.

Our choice to present the degree to which the scholarly notion of language materiality speaks to practices that are shared and lived is driven by our own research among Indigenous societies and archival research, which point to continuous coaction and verbal and non-verbal engagement with the land and the environment (cf. Wilson 2008: 87). These reciprocal relations and forms of co-existence are expressed and experienced in the multiple ways of speaking, writing, and using verbal and non-verbal practices presented in this special issue. Many linguistic anthropologists and Indigenous scholars have already demonstrated the importance of interacting verbally and non-verbally with the land, and its human and other-than-human inhabitants. Indeed, relations between language and the environment have already been examined in Cushing’s Manual Concepts:
A Study of the Influence of Hand-Usage on Culture-Growth (1892), and Malinowski’s Coral Gardens and Their Magic Vol. II (1935). Several scholars have investigated the relations between Indigenous languages and the land (e.g. Basso 1996; Rosborough and Rorick 2017; Whitney-Squire 2016). Our contribution to these long-standing academic endeavors is to engage with the more recent notion of language materiality. We aim to comprehend in more depth some of its assumptions, such as the agreed monism according to which language and materiality can be brought together as a wholeness (Nakassis 2013: 400), while relying on the multiple—and often not immediately visible—tangible relations that Indigenous peoples ostensibly have with the land when engaging in verbal acts.

The richness of this collection is reflected in its multiple approaches to language materiality as experienced, lived, and expressed verbally in different parts of the world by different Indigenous peoples and minority groups, beyond the binary division of material and immaterial realms. The articles access heritage languages and communicative practices in different ways (e.g. through the lens of specific morpho-syntactic structures, performing genres, and narratives) and make articulate connections with the notion of language materiality so as to highlight its potential, expressions, and lived experiences among Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in the Global North and South. Such work becomes even more pressing when we are reminded that several local ways of communicating have been oppressed, marginalized for centuries, and are still at risk of becoming obsolete in many parts of the world. The authors of this special issue come from different scholarly backgrounds—Anthropology, Indigenous Studies, Linguistics, and Folklore—and they conduct their research with Indigenous peoples both in the northern and southern hemispheres, and some of them are Indigenous themselves. They rely on an emic approach to research and the lived experiences in the field, which duly allows engaging with and expanding the theoretical propositions in a critical and ethnographically-grounded perspective.

The articles of this special issue substantially cover three main sub-themes, which are present and intertwined to a greater or lesser extent in the work of all the contributors. The themes are: (in-)visibility of actors in a context, narrating and producing sociality, and emotions and affect. These are the most predominant themes, though other themes are also been touched upon in each contribution. The three main themes show that the dominant perception of the “(in-)visible” is that it is an intangible and often irrelevant force in our everyday experiences of the world. However, by addressing speech, the movement of air, among others, and narratives we can see that invisibility is a crucial part of language. Invisible presences and agencies can be considered to have very tangible and material consequences in the world (see Virtanen and Honkasalo 2020). Especially multiple chronotropic
perceptions and narrations of the world are expressed in the communicative practices among the peoples included in this special issue. Lastly, here we would like to point to the diverse embodied participations in life through language, which gives rise to humans’ emotions and affects.

Before delving into sub-themes, each article and their contents, we should indicate that the languages and peoples presented in this special issue vary according to their location, number of speakers, and political status as Indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities. These include Veps, Mari, and Seto, whose language belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic languages. The Vepsian language has received the status of an Indigenous minority language and according to the last census, less than 6,000 people self-identify as Veps in Russia. It is used in three different administrative regions, which affect the activists’ revival efforts differently. The Mari language, primarily used in the Mari Republic of the Russian Federation, is spoken by approximately 400,000 individuals. Uralic languages are represented in this special issue also by its Samoyedic part, namely by Tundra Nenets. The languages of the Tundra and Forest Nenets are currently spoken by ca. 40,000 people living in the Russian North. The Seto language (in some cases, also referred to as a dialect) is spoken on the borders between South Estonia and Russia. Seto do not hold the status of an Indigenous people in Estonia, though they are listed as Indigenous in Russia. Sakha (Yakutian) is a Turkic language, mostly used in the Sakha Republic of the Russian Federation and it has approximately 450,000 speakers. Latin America and southwestern Amazonia more specifically is represented by the Apurinã, numbering some 8,000 persons in Brazil, and having some 3,000 current speakers. The Apurinã language belongs to the Arawak language family. Traditional Apurinã stories are narrated both in Apurinã and in Portuguese.

The contributions in this special issue present the above-mentioned peoples’ ways of communicating and their material ontologies, which have largely been overlooked in academic debates. The following sections describe the sub-themes, which bring together all the papers of the issue, while linking them to the notion of language materiality.

2 The material (in-)visible elements of language

Living relationally through experiences of language that are verbal and non-verbal often denotes several elements that can be invisible to the eye, and yet are crucial for creating social worlds. These can be “invisible, intangible, ephemeral” forces that are agentative, and explain the ways in which Indigenous peoples engage
with the world they live in. The ways of speaking, breathing, blowing, smoking, visualizing, and other communicative practices are often understood to have agency in the co-construction of social worlds and thus need to be pondered and employed carefully and respectfully. In ritualized spaces, ways of speaking necessitate objects, tools, substances, and materials for the rituals in order to have the desired efficacy (Desjarlais 1996; Favret-Saada 2015[2009]; Malinowski 1922; Severi 2002, among many others). They are often not to be perceived as “materially” separate from the tools, but rather as a part of a broader ontological event. These actions, such as “shared breath” (Siragusa et al. 2020: 473), are “based on ‘sharing and mutual responsiveness’, and knowledges (sometimes with a certain level of improvisation) of specific ritualized practices”.

In this vein, Laura Siragusa and Ol’ga Zhukova (this issue) explore the capacity of (specific) words to affect relations with the land and its human and other-than-human dwellers when presenting puheged and vajhed/pakitas (verbal charms), another performative genre used among Veps in Northwest Russia. In their chapter, entitled “In the event: Blurring boundaries between language and materiality by ‘blowing specific words,’” language materiality is manifested in the performance of “blowing” air along with the recitation of “specific words,” which allows for human and often other-than-human agencies to attend to one another while promoting changes in people and the environment. Language materiality comprises experiences that similarly bring intangible and invisible elements to the fore and are understood to affect the course that life takes. Furthermore, this research led them to discover how ritualized language is ontologically appreciated as material and as having weight.

Kristina Yuzieva’s article (this issue) also employs a consequential approach to materiality through the presentation of several morpho-syntactic structures of the Mari language and folkloric genres. She demonstrates how the Mari, another Indigenous people in the Russian Federation, partake in the world’s events and occurrences alongside other other-than-human animals, such as owls, by engaging in verbal practices that continuously create links and connections with human experience. The theme of invisibility also becomes central to the articles by Karina Lukin (this issue), which investigates mythic worlds against the preconception that they are imagined, intangible, or even ephemeral. Similarly, the article by Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen, Francisco Apurinã, and Sidney Facundes (this issue), drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, presents the imagined ancestral world that is brought to the material contexts of storytelling among the Apurinã in Brazilian Amazonia.
3 Narrating and making the world

World-making practices and so-called “worlding” include verbal arts and storytelling, which are communicative practices that often recur in the several articles of this special issue. The multiple ways—be they oral or written—in which lived and continuously negotiated sociality is narrated and communicated have the capacity to act as world-making forces. Communicative practices, often in the form of verbal art, are not only agentive for those who employ them, but they can also affect others’ ways of thinking, knowing, and being in the world. Linking narratives shared among Nenets, an Indigenous people of the Russian North, Lukin indicates in her article how these mythic worlds, the material objects found in the tundra, and the metaphor used in the narratives are not seen as separate. Narrating and producing sociality is also present in the article by Madis Arukask (this issue), who shows how the letter—understood as written text, any sign, ornament or any other abstract phenomenon—forms a unity and a whole with the physical world. Using examples from Seto runo songs (leelo) in Estonia, Arukask indicates that the letter does not narrowly belong to the sphere of the “written text.”

Verbal art and storytelling in particular can point to differing time scales and temporalities (e.g. de Certau 1984; Hastrup 1987; Turner 1988). In addition, storytelling practices open doors to different social spaces, in which power relations take new forms and beings can co-construct particular relations (Escobar 2018). Verbal art and storytelling often enable Indigenous peoples to constantly negotiate their position in the world in relation to other dimensions, which might strike one as invisible, intangible, and volatile. How materiality plays a part in these negotiations is addressed in the article by Virtanen and colleagues, who explore an Apurinã origin story and Apurinã’s entanglements with other-than-humans and their central co-participation in life. Thanks to auto-ethnographic experiences and fieldwork, the authors offer an innovative interpretation of what storytelling does for Apurinã, given that it requires material mediation, the community and specific plant substances. Storytelling occurs in community meetings, which are themselves a space of trust where people can effectively share emotions, affects, and embody a common history.

4 Attuned emotions and affect

Among Indigenous societies, participation in life often comprises interacting and negotiating one’s position with other-than-human entities, with whom the environment is both shared and co-constructed. Such participation can entail a “bodily
and emotional dimension of intersubjective interaction” (Busch 2015:341) between humans and other-than-humans, which Kwek and Seyfert (2018) refer to as “affective attunement.” “Intersubjective interactions” implies that worlds are co-joint endeavors, in which emotions emerging in humans can result from both a given situation and a context, as well as other-than-human agencies, and vice versa. In this sense, the environment becomes a space where emotions and affects are lived relationally, and can consequently contribute to its formation and how people interact with it, as shown in the article by Jenanne Ferguson (this issue). Her paper introduces the contemporary uses of algys (blessing poems) among Sakha speakers, while addressing both steadiness and flow in their transmission and circulation (orally and by phone or computer). Ferguson elegantly frames language materiality within the experiences brought about by the use of this genre and conceives it not only in the multisensorial participation of people when performing algys, but also in the broader emotions and affects that arise along with recurrent anxieties about the preservation of this Indigenous language. For this reason, Ferguson shows how the use of algys comprises sensory qualities of language along with continuous attention to the political economy, which gives them a chronotropic dimension.

One way to create as well as to coordinate the bodily, sensorial, and emotional dimensions that humans experience with other-than-human subjects is to engage in verbal and non-verbal communicative practices. In fact, narratives, charms, and blessings are often used not only as a means of entering into unison with the other entities which partake in life, but also as emotional and affective states themselves, which are shared and co-created in the encounter (cf. Feld 2012; Wilce 2009). These verbal and non-verbal encounters allow for physical, embodied, and material feelings to be sensed, which is only one aspect of how language materiality could be conceptualized with regard to affects and emotions. The other is that such feelings can also spur action in the world, which also has very material consequences.

5 Concluding remarks

Conceptualizing language materiality in such a way that recognizes other-than-human actors, in their visible and invisible presences, has allowed us to find new aspects of language in ontological and epistemological terms. Our current special issue shows that language materiality is manifested in and through locally shared social practices and embodied skills. We especially point to the performative, corporeal, practice-based, intermediary and phenomenological aspects of language materiality. Our discussion introduces a new angle to the previous
discussions on practice theories of language, which have emphasized certain contextual and ecological conditions (e.g. Austin 1962; Garner 2004; Mühlhäusler 2000), gender issues, habitus, and styles (e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 1991; Irvine 2001; Ochs 1992) that are immanent aspects to be activated. In contrast, our cases point to materially instantiated events of communicative and narrative traditions. These are shown to be specific language technologies (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2015; Hill-ewaert 2015; Malinowski 1922, 1935; Saussy 2016) which form meaningful co-existences and relations.

Our collection of articles encourages further discussion around issues of language materiality among Indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, who have developed a continuous dialogue with their local environments and territories. We have brought into the spotlight long-standing local experiences and knowledges, which are often based on carefulness and respect for other-than-human entities. The disruptions caused by colonialism and aggressive policies have not only marginalized these relations and their wedded practices, but also dwarfed their materiality to something feeble and intangible. Through a language analysis of the peoples addressed in this issue, we aim at reversing oppressive powers that still marginalize and discriminate them. This may not only help us better appreciate what affects the current environmental crisis that we are all facing, but most importantly, it may also advance epistemological justice, by pushing ahead the materiality of Indigenous and minorities’ ways of communicating and creating social worlds. It may contribute to moving beyond the “white” privilege, which is often also materialized in policy-making processes and their core categories.

References


