

Language in Society

“Minoritized and Marginalized Language Varieties in the Digital Sphere”

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Abstracts (in order of appearance)

“Respect the very few rules that we have!”: Variation and normativity in online Fiuman

Marko Simonović, University of Graz

Fiuman (endonym, *fiumano* in Italian, *fijumanski* in Croatian) is a critically endangered Venetian variety spoken and written in Rijeka/Fiume, Croatian, as well as in Fiuman diaspora. Studies on the use of Fiuman in Croatia consistently indicate a decline in its usage, yet underscore the significance of written Fiuman, especially in online interactions (Plešković et al. 2019). Fiuman does not have an explicit written standard and is generally written using a version of Italian orthography.

This study explores how Fiuman online writers negotiate variation and emergent normative discourses in public online spaces. I especially focus on the interactions in and around the Facebook page *Solo robe in fiuman* (admined by myself) which daily posts contents in Fiuman. I illustrate several linguistic generalisations that are perceived as rules of written Fiuman and exclusionary discourses generated around them. I describe the process by which the page has gradually evolved into an anti-normative stronghold with a focus on promoting variation. Finally I critically discuss two emergent mechanisms employed in legitimising stigmatised variants: demonstrating their active use by a sizable portion of modern speakers and showing their historical continuity.

Plešković, Maša, Kraš, Tihana, & Branka Drljača Margić. 2019. Changes in the self-reported frequency of use of the Fiuman dialect: Implications for language maintenance. *Govor*, 36(2), 195-218.

Linguistic construction of regional identities in Croatian digital communication

Antonio Oštarić & Lucija Šimičić, University of Zadar

The Croatian language is characterized by high intralinguistic diversity, consisting of over twenty different dialects grouped into three main dialect groups – Shtokavian, Kajkavian and Chakavian. While one of the Shtokavian dialects has been chosen as the basis for standardization, and as such has been promoted in official institutional discourses, it is only in a more recent history that the dialects from the other two groups started to be used in the public space and media. The advancement of digital communication enhanced their visibility and use in various social media platforms. However, Kajkavian and Chakavian are perceived very differently by the Croatian

language speakers, and although both are present in the digital sphere, the varieties of Kajkavian on the one hand and Chakavian on the other seem to be used in very different ways in identity construction in digital communication. By limiting our analysis to websites and social media, our aim is to explore the ways in which Kajkavian and Chakavian identities become enregistered online and what linguistic and communicative strategies and choices are employed to construct these identities in digital communication.

Re-thinking language and space: Towards a new research agenda in minority language sociolinguistics

Bernadette O'Rourke, University of Glasgow

In the age of technology, where boundaries are pushed beyond geographical space and new communities of practice are emerging through online communities, greater engagement with language and space provides opportunities to examine this new potential for minority language sociolinguistics (O'Rourke 2022). Virtual spaces provide new domains in which the minoritized language can be used and new ways of connecting. This can be key where speaker density is low, something which is often the case for networked communities of minority language speakers. In this talk I will explore the opportunities but also the challenges this presents. I will examine the concept of 'breathing spaces' for minoritized languages and the role that technology can play in creating spaces where speakers can 'breathe' and feel supported when brought together as a collective. I will draw on a recent community engagement project where digital tools in the form of an interactive map-based app have been developed to enable social networks of 'new speakers' of minority languages in urban contexts to form and grow.

O'Rourke, B., 2022. Language and space: A new research agenda in minority language sociolinguistics. *Language, policy and territory: A festschrift for Colin H. Williams*, pp.61-80.

«Dialectal resurgences» in computer-mediated communication: the case of Molise Croatian

Francesca Sammartino, University of Zagreb

In the 21st century sociolinguists such as Berruto (2006) recorded a «new dialectality» and «dialectal resurgences» in Italy and observed a relocation of the dialect in the Italian repertoire from the functional point of view and the point of view of the domains of use. Among the new domains with dialectal occurrences there is computer-mediated communication. This thesis is confirmed by our findings. In fact, a similar innovation also concerns the subaltern variety of bilingual speakers of the Croatian minority in Molise (Italy). Molise Croatian is used on websites, social networks and instant messaging, with different functions, usage values and structural features. Although the number of speakers of this variety is decreasing, Molise

Croatian shows a certain degree of vitality in computer-mediated communication and a certain ability to adapt to new domains of use.

Variation and contested ideologies in the use of Meänkieli online

Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi, University College London and Uppsala University

Meänkieli is a minoritised and endangered Finno-Ugric language traditionally spoken in Northern Sweden by 20,000-70,000 people. My research questions are: What variation can we detect in the use of Meänkieli online? Which ideologies steer the use? I have identified the following variables: regional varieties (the most widely used Torne Valley vs the more threatened varieties Kieruna and Jellivaara); the use of Swedish-origin words vs Finnic words; traditional grammar vs the language of new speakers; translanguaging and code-switching vs a monolingual model; standardisation vs a polynomic model; Meänkieli in Sweden vs the dialect also known as 'Meänkieli' spoken in Finland. My data comes from posts and comments on social media, websites, and written news media. Theoretically this study relies on the notion of linguistic ideologies as pertaining to endangered- and minoritised-language contexts. I will study these heterogenous practices and varying conceptualisations of Meänkieli using critical discourse analysis.

Minoritised language learning in and with the digital sphere

Stefanie Cajka, University of Vienna

Following a usage-based approach, learning and using a language are conceptualised as intertwined (see, for example, Ellis 2015). When learning a minoritised language, however, the use of the language in everyday life can be challenging due to the (potential) scarcity of opportunities for personal interaction. The digital sphere can therefore play an important role in facilitating the learning and use of minoritised languages.

This presentation discusses the potential of digital methods for learning minoritised languages, drawing on the HORIZON EUROPE project "RISE UP – Revitalising Languages and Safeguarding Cultural Diversity". The overarching aim of this project is to contribute to the empowerment of minoritised language communities. The project focuses on five selected languages in Europe: Aranese, Aromanian, Burgenland Croatian, Cornish, and Seto.

The paper draws on findings from ethnographic research and a survey distributed among these language communities. It also discusses the development of the RISE UP digital toolkit, with a focus on its content for minoritised language learning and use.

Ellis, N. C. (2015). Cognitive and social aspects of learning from usage. In T. Cadierno & S. W. Eskildsen (Eds.), *Usage-based perspectives on second language learning* (pp. 49–74). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110378528-005>

Last night of the prompts: How language is being displaced in the digital sphere

Christoph Purschke, University of Luxembourg

The emergence of the digitally enriched lifeworld has seemingly led to the ubiquity of language in all aspects of digitally anchored practices, be it in chatbot applications, social media, or private messengers. At the same time, it is clear that digitization, datafication, and economization technologies are in many ways displacing language from its traditional functions in organizing human culture. This includes its medial binding (e.g. in social media), its semiotic quality (e.g. in chatbot applications) and technical representation (e.g. through data processing), but also the political dependence of the presence and pertinence of languages on available 'training data' and the interests of tech companies, as well as the decoupling of the epistemic content of statements from linguistic performance. These issues will be discussed from a theoretical perspective.

Redefining virtual communities as breathing spaces: A revised approach

Guillem Belmar Viernes, University of Oregon

While many communities still do not have the resources to access digital spaces, let alone claim a place for themselves, those that do are immersed in a virtual linguistic landscape where they become even more surrounded by major global languages. In this context, Belmar and Glass (2019) adapted Fishman's (1991) concept of *breathing spaces*, as an asynchronous place which allow for the existence of communities of practice unbounded from their "traditional" heartlands, bypassing colonial borders and even bridging the geographical distance between the diaspora and the communities of origin. Such communities enable the emergence of language maintenance practices by providing safe platforms to use and/or learn minority languages.

This talk examines how the virtual communities as breathing spaces concept has developed in the years since Belmar and Glass published the initial framework. I will draw from my own work on different communities and contexts, ranging from Western European minoritized languages to Indigenous and Indigenous diaspora contexts in the Americas. I put forward a revised set of characteristics for breathing spaces, based on my own work and that of my colleague Maggie Glass, as well as an analytical framework for qualitative research of such spaces. In so doing, I suggest that the idea of a virtual breathing space is not a one-size-fits-all concept, and must be flexible in the theoretical boundaries that inform the framework.

Menopausal: Rethinking discourses on Gender and Aging

Pauliina Lukinmaa, University of Eastern Finland

Once largely overlooked outside medical discourse, menopause has gained increased attention in recent years, particularly in relation to workplace inequalities rooted in sexism and ageism (Westwood, 2024). Public figures have shared their experiences, and discussions have expanded through online platforms, podcasts, articles, and books. In this process, semi-private and private digital spaces have emerged as key sites for validating personal experiences and fostering allyship. These discussions, shaped by sociolinguistic dynamics, reveal the evolving social and cultural perceptions of menopause. The presentation critically examines the biopower embedded in these discourses, focusing on the multifaceted lived experiences that highlight socio-political dynamics. In this context, we approach queer studies and view gender and aging as dynamic processes, shaped by the ever-changing nature of our lives, the contexts we inhabit, and mediated through language (Brady et al., 2002). By exploring interactions within selected online LGBTIQ+ groups, we identify patterns of power both within and beyond these groups, examining how the changes connected to menopause are represented both internally and relationally. Our analysis also reflects how reframing menopause as a socially and culturally mediated experience may challenge traditional notions of biology and gender.”

„Figlia mia, non ti picchio io. Ti picchia la povertà“: About the Roma minority in the media

Anita Skelin, University of Zagreb

There are around 18.000 Roma people in Croatia making who make up the 0.46 % of the population. Although they have a representative in parliament and six different societies funded by the government for information, publication and cultural activities, there are still many negative portrayals of the Roma in the media. The most striking issue that recurs in the media is the segregation of minority members and the protection of human rights and access to health care, legal aid and other institutional support. Here we present the analysis of various media texts and materials on Roma from two main sources, including those prepared by Roma and those coming from government, officials and institutions dealing with minorities. The aim is to understand the image of Roma made by Roma themselves and the image made by others. How the culture, the people and the problems are portrayed and seen in different sources and how this can potentially influence public opinion about the Roma.

Digital communication and offline linguistic and social practices among the Aromanian communities in the Balkans

Eva Duran Eppler, RISE UP, University of Roehampton, London

In this presentation I will outline the dynamic relationship between digital communication and offline linguistic and social practices among the Aromanian communities in the Balkans. Special attention will be paid to differences in the dynamics between Aromanian communities residing in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and the diaspora. Potential reasons for these cross-border differences, such as the influence of language policies, the status of Aromanian in the named nation states, language ideologies, demographic and language vitality factors, are going to be examined. Comparisons will be made with the four other RISE UP case study communities (Aranese, Cornish, Burgenland Croatian and Seto) to show how the above named factors influence the relationship between digital communication and offline linguistic and social practices among the Aromanian communities in the Balkans and beyond and how they can contribute to language maintenance and revitalisation.

“The Icelandic Village” for Burgenland Croatian

Katharina Strasser, University of Vienna

Currently, one central focus of language revitalisation efforts in the context of minoritised languages is on so-called ‘new speakers’ (Cajka et al., 2024). Burgenland Croatian can be learnt in various courses - but finding spaces of language use outside the classroom is rather difficult. The language promotion concept ‘The Icelandic Village’ (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013) attempts to solve this discrepancy with a ‘usage-based approach’ (Wagner, 2015) in order to allow language learners to participate in everyday language use. Companies are trained in how they can support language learners in using the language in everyday situations. In the RISE UP project, we are currently examining how the concept of ‘The Icelandic Village’ can be adapted to the Burgenland Croatian context. A participatory approach is used (Leonard & Haynes, 2010) and the language community and various experts are involved in the concept planning. Central questions that we would like to answer with group discussions and ethnographic field research are: How do ‘new speakers’ of Burgenland Croatian imagine such a language village? Where can such a language village be established? How can a pedagogical concept be developed that learners can use in an informal language learning setting? How do companies need to be trained? The results should contribute to the revitalisation of Burgenland Croatian.

References

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Theodórsdóttir, G., & Friðriksdóttir, K. (2013). Íslenskuþorpið: Leið til þátttöku í daglegum samskiptum á Íslensku. *Milli mála. Tímarit um erlend tungumál og menningu*, 5(5), 13–44.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110378528-006>

Regional diversity and authenticity? Using Sorbian and Burgenland Croatian online for branding and promotion

Katharina Tyran, University of Helsinki

My presentation discusses if and how Sorbian and Burgenland Croatian as languages and cultures of minority groups are deployed as an added value or for branding. I will address both perspectives on strategies from within, by minority group members, as well as from official bodies. The case studies presented will focus on the federal states and regions as a macro-level, on municipalities as a meso-level and individual businesses on a micro-level, by applying approaches from multimodal discourse analysis on the web-presence of selected examples, together with ethnographic methodological approaches. I will elaborate on multiple ways in which federal as well as local communities and individual companies and entrepreneurs engage with minority languages and cultures for a commodification in branding and promoting spaces, place and products.