**Lingoing, language labels and metrolingual practices**

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**Abstract**

There is a potential tension between the descriptions of language use by contemporary sociolinguistic researchers keen to focus on metro- poly- or translanguaging – with a focus on repertoires of semiotic resources – and the terms used by language users themselves – which may accord much more with traditional linguistic labels. While we tried to account for this disparity in previous discussions (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 2014) by focusing on the push and pull between fluid and fixed language use and descriptions, we focus in this paper on the negotiations around the labels used by the participants themselves. While it is certainly the case that the tools for discussing language use and affiliation in everyday discourse are themselves linguistically constrained (using commonly accepted language labels) the terms people use to talk about their multilingual environments are not necessarily as normative as they first appear. Such apparently stable referents are themselves part of a more complex set of identity repertoires that are always being reworked. What is at stake, therefore, is not so much a polarisation between fluid language use and fixed language ascriptions as a constant reconfiguration of language meanings.

**Keywords**: Metrolingualism, language ideologies, language practices, fixity and fluidity.

**1 Introduction: Looking beneath languagised and de-languagised worlds**

Across our extensive metrolingual database – drawing on recordings, ethnographic observations and interviews in cafes, restaurants, shops, construction sites, markets and other workplaces (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015) – there are many comments by participants on the languages they use. They list languages, talk about the percentage of languages they understand, the difference and lack of difference between languages and much more. In other words, the ways in which many participants talk about their everyday language use appear to echo the normative and enumerative strategies of modernist language ideologies. This observation is unremarkable since the use of popular discourses about languages is generally expected in such contexts: one speaks this or that named language, one can list and count languages, one can talk in terms of percentages. Indeed, had any of our participants spoken in terms of translanguaging, polylanguaging or metrolanguaging, the status of the data as local language practices would surely have been questionable.

As researchers, we are interested in both everyday language use and everyday metalinguistic discussions, but we also have to come to terms with this disjuncture between our ways of talking about language and our participants’ modes of expression. We may opt for the potentially problematic proposition that as linguists we know better than them, or at least we have an alternative, technical vocabulary for their everyday terms. Yet this argument sits uncomfortably with a linguistic ethnographic framework that would urge us to deal with local categories of language description, to be more emic than etic. What we argue in this paper, however, is that if we work with the labels used by the participants in our research – “It’s all Yugoslav” or they “use broken English and lingo in Lebanese” – while also subjecting such labels to a more critical scrutiny, it becomes clear that the terms people use to talk about their multilingual environments are not necessarily as normative as they first appear. Indeed we also find these popular metalinguistic terminologies are flexible, malleable and open to change.

From this point of view, the linguistic ethnographic imperative is not to juxtapose emic or etic categories (or even to operate with this distinction) but to investigate in greater depth what is meant by such terms. They do indeed “use broken English and lingo in Lebanese”; it’s just that we don’t write in such terms just as they don’t talk in terms of metrolingualism. This is to take up Latour’s (2004) injunction to move from matters of fact to matters of concern, to try to understand reality – what is going on – not by moving away from it but by approaching it in greater complexity. The point is not to debunk but to understand. By exploring how language is used and talked about in different places, by taking “the concrete functioning of these norms and expectations as starting points for questioning them” we can view such terms “as problems rather than as facts” (Blommaert and Dong 2010: 10–11). Our close observations along with the participants’ accounts of their everyday language life suggest that as they align themselves with particular language varieties, ethnicities, food types, cultural practices, work places and activities, these apparently stable referents are themselves part of a more complex set of identity repertoires that are always being reworked.

This is not therefore best understood in terms of a disjuncture between a de-languagised realm of academic analysis (by which we refer not to a context free of language ideologies but rather to a context where new linguistic ideologies have sought new terminologies – trans- poly-and metrolanguaging – to escape the baggage of earlier frameworks) and a languagised realm of everyday analysis (where languages are named and labelled along the lines of modernist, statist language ideologies that assume alignments between languages, nations and ethnicities), but rather as a call to make visible what lies beneath such everyday terms and linguistic labels. If the notion of a languagised world implies a particular set of normative language ideologies, the notion of a de-languagised world by no means implies a world devoid of language ideologies: This is about different types of language ideology rather than their presence or (impossible) absence.

Although none of our research participants suggests explicitly that they’re engaged in metrolingual language practices, this is perhaps, on another level, precisely what they are telling us. Their talk about languages uses neither a fixed set of languagised terms nor a fluid set of delanguagised terms. They may use the language of a languagised world to do so, but their understanding of their own linguistic worlds is much closer to the delanguagised worlds of everyday practice. Once we bring an understanding of enregisterment (Agha 2007) to this question, we can see, as Møller and Jørgensen (2011) point out, that this is not only a question of how different types of language use (such as “lingoing in Lebanese”) become recognised as registers but also that the use of language labels (“broken English”, “it’s all Yugoslav”) is also a process of enregisterment. By being a part of everyday linguistic diversity in the city, and by employing their linguistic resources to get things done, these participants also challenge common normative assumptions about multi- and pluri-lingualism as either social or individual capacities in clearly defined languages.

**2 ‘I don’t like to speak it as Serbia, Croatia, this bullshit, it’s all Yugoslav …’**

Two things in relation to language ideologies became apparent as we talked to workers in construction sites and markets in Sydney: First, although workers might use common language labels – English, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, for example – they were also quick to dismiss these as useful labels. Second, when they engaged in the common practice of counting languages they spoke, such enumeration was very much up for negotiation. Among workers of Bosnian Serbian heritage in lunchtime conversations on a Sydney construction site it was quite common to question some of the normative assumptions of a languagised world. Despite the differences constructed among the languages of the former Yugoslavia (see Busch and Schick, 2007), there were no grounds to enumerate them separately: “I’m using English, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian. But those three languages is the same, you know, grammar is the same, just couple of words is different” (Damijan, interview, December 3, 2011).

Damijan’s co-worker and stepfather, Igor, who lost his close family during the Bosnian war (Damijan is a son of his second wife) has a related account of language, clearly influenced by his life trajectories. By defying the divisions that have been created after the break up of Yugoslavia, he claims ‘I don’t like to speak it as Serbia, Croatia, this bullshit, it’s all Yugoslav … Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, is same language … We speak Yugoslav. When it comes some of this people who is no speak our language, we speak English’ (Igor, interview, March 12, 2011). Zlatan, another worker of Bosnian-Serbian background, similarly counts his linguistic repertoire as two languages, English and Serbian, since “Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian, that’s similar” (Zlatan, interview, February 14, 2012).

Nemia, his co-worker from Fiji, on the other hand, unlike Zlatan’s shrinking linguistic repertoire, asserted that he speaks “different language, maybe sixty language?” Nemia explains: “We have different language. Like, my village, we have different language, other village is a different language, other village is a different language. But all the language … all the village… I can speak the language” (Nemia, interview, February 14, 2012). In response to Zlatan’s downgrading of his own repertoire to two, Nemia rethinks his count “Yeah, I’ve got one, two, three, four, five, six … seven, maybe ten, twenty?” Nemia’s shifting account of his multilingualism points on the one hand to the popular tendency to count languages but on the other hand to great flexibility about what that number might be and what might count as a language. Zlatan simply comments “He is polyglot”.

Meanwhile, Marko, a worker of Serbian background (moved to Australia at the age of 10) who is in charge of the site, decides that these are not languages “Dialect, or different language?” Now Nemia is unsure “Different…but…yeah. Similar similar”. Marko turns teacher: “Probably different dialect. Like north of Serbia and south of Serbia … oh, very different. I have to go ‘What? What?’ for them, for me, to understand them”. Drago confirms: “Same happen in Macedonia. Small country, lot of different dialects”. Drago’s invocation of Macedonia is intriguing since, as Irvine and Gal (1999) note, Macedonia has long stood as the archetypical opposite to European linguistic and political order, a region depicted as “chaotic” because “the relationship between linguistic practices and social categories in Macedonia diverged so fundamentally from the expectations of Western Europeans” (65). A Macedonian marketplace was likened to “Babel” since a traveller might hear as many as “six distinct languages and four allied dialects…one may distinguish in the Babel two Slav and two Albanian dialects, Vlach, Greek, Turkish, Hebrew Spanish, and Romany” (Brailsford 1906: 85; cited in Irvine and Gal 1999: 64). Drago, however, is more content to view this as dialectal variety rather than the anti-European Babel it has at times been deemed to represent.

Nemia does not seem convinced by Drago’s explanation of dialects: “But the words the same?”. The conversation moves on, however, and this struggle over language enumeration and dialects gets lost in the general lunchtime banter. These discussions suggest that with Marko, Drago and Zlatan counting down their numerical multilingualism (“all this is similar”) while Nemia counts his up (“maybe sixty”) before downgrading (“maybe ten, twenty?”), and with the indeterminacy of whether languages should be seen as national entities or village entities, whether speaking the same language should entail mutual comprehensibility or whether we should talk in terms of dialects or languages, self-reporting on languages is interesting qualitatively, but problematic quantitatively.

There are of course other ideologies lurking behind these linguistic enumerations, most notably on Nemia’s side a prioritising of village-based diversity over nationalist language ideologies, contrasted with a nationalist nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia and its relatively effective multilingual policies (Busch and Schick 2007). Language is very much up for negotiation, however: it is certainly true that the terms used to discuss languages are generally common-sense language labels (though it’s unclear what Nemia would have used for his Fijian languages), yet these are clearly also to be contested, rejected, adjusted or changed. They are engaged in what we term metrolingual ideology negotiation, an unsettling of ways in which assumed connections between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography may be related.

**3 ‘It’s become an extreme language’: Shifting views on language use**

Everyday terms and talk about language are open to all sorts of compromise, or metrolingual ideology negotiation: the terms in which people talk about language use may seem quite normative but they may also be up for discussion. Examples from various restaurant kitchens show this clearly. Owned by a second-generation Greek, Dexter, the inner-city Sydney pizzeria, Patris, is ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse. The members of staff are of Polish, (Kristyan, Aleksy and Tomek), Greek (Dexter and Simon), Nepalese (Nischal), Indian (Jaidev), French (Jean), Thai (Betty) and Anglo-Australian (Mark) backgrounds. Such identifications, however, are only of limited use since these workers’ linguistic and identity repertoires are being constantly reworked through their life trajectories and their everyday exposure to various linguistic resources hovering in the workplace. For example, one of the cooks of Nepalese background, Nischal, who speaks Nepalese, Bangla and “a bit of Gujarati, Punjabi… definitely a lot of Indian” as well as English, explains some of his more recent linguistic repertoire from interacting with other restaurant workers: “Actually I can speak a bit of Czech and Slovak also. Because of the work mostly, words…” So what, we asked, was the language used mainly in the kitchen, English?

Excerpt 1. Sidney pizzeria, August 25, 2011. (N: Nischal, R: Researcher)

1. N: Polish.
2. R: Polish?
3. N: Polish. Not much English going on in here.
4. R: Really? OK, that’s not what the brothers said. The brothers   
    said you all spoke English!
5. N: Well maybe that brother [points to one of them] said because   
    he has Colombian girlfriend who doesn’t speak Polish.
6. R: Right, right, right. So you reckon it’s mostly… When you’re in   
    the kitchen it’s mostly Polish?
7. N: Polish.

From Vietnamese workers in nail salons to the subdivisions of the construction industry (Balkan form workers, Italian concreters, Lebanese excavators, Pacific Islander steel workers) different businesses are often known for their particular ethnic and linguistic affiliations (Panayiotopoulos 2010; Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Patris seems to have attracted staff from Eastern European backgrounds ever since Dexter hired the first ‘Polish’ staff over 10 years ago, and Nischal’s account of the Polish use in the kitchen coincides with this trend. The exchange above, however, was revealing since it countered the view expressed by the other two cooks, Polish brothers Aleksy and Krzysztof, who said they used mainly English unless talking to each other. When we questioned Nischal further on whether he used Polish, he replied “A little bit. But I don’t need to speak, I just work. They’re the ones speaking” (Nischal interview, August 25, 2011). Nischal’s observation that it is cooking rather than talking that is the main activity of the kitchen accords with recordings, which reveal lengthy stretches of cooking activities: chopping, frying, washing food under running taps and so on. Yet there are also people giving instructions, putting orders for ingredients over the phone, joking, teasing and singing, drawing on various linguistics resources amidst ebbs and flows of people, language and activity. The following shows a variety of interactions that occurred in the kitchen.

Amid the sounds of cooking and various verbal interactions on the periphery of the kitchen, a variety of interactions took place within a 16 minute period:

1. (00:00-01:52) Aleksy orders bulk items from the grocery supplier over the phone, assisted by Nischal.
2. (06:24-06:30) Nischal starts singing Beyoncé’s ‘Single Ladies’ after Betty in the background calls out “I’m single”.
3. (10:35-11:48) Aleksy receives a phone call from his Colombian girlfriend and leaves the kitchen. Betty still speaking in the background.
4. (11:56-12:12) Aleksy returns and starts a conversation in Polish with Krzysztof about garlic for cooking.
5. (16:18-16:33) Nischal teases Aleksy about his Spanish and then discusses the lamb dish he is preparing.

Although this list suggests a fairly ordered sequence, in fact interactions and activities overlap: from continuing cooking activities (Nischal is experimenting with a lamb dish, which he discusses with Aleksy in the final series of exchanges, which follows on from a previous interaction in Polish between Aleksy and Krzysztof about garlic) to the phone calls going out (Aleksy ordering food over the phone) and coming in (his girlfriend), as well as Betty’s voice from outside triggering Nischal’s singing Beyoncé’s ‘Single Ladies’ (Betty had recently divorced). As much as the kitchen is the professional space where people get things done, it is also one intersection among many between people’s embodied and social lives. The kitchen is a place of “articulated moments” of “a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (Massey 2005: 28). In this space, quantification of language or selecting one language as a lingua franca is not an easy affair.

For example, in an exchange between Nischal, Krzysztof and Aleksy that occurs a little later, Krzysztof trips up in his search for the English word for cheese, via Italian rather than Polish.

Excerpt 2. Sidney pizzeria (N: Nischal, K: Krzysztof, A: Aleksy)   
 Italian: *Italics*; English: plain

1. N: No…the *mozzarella*. And a whole bag of potatoes. I’ll cut it.
2. K: I’ll bring *formaggio… formaggi*…Whatever whatever it is!
3. A: Cheese.
4. K: Yes.
5. N: Cheese well that’s what it is.

Here the Italianness of the pizza restaurant intervenes in their linguistic negotiations, as Krzysztof, perhaps picking up on Nischal’s mention of *mozzarella*, searches for their shared resource for talking about cheese. It is not of course Polish that is intervening here but the Italian *formaggio* which is a well-established ‘ingredient’ of the repertoire of the space.

Nischal’s suggestion both that Polish is the language of the kitchen and that the others do most of the speaking points to the way that Polish is part of the repertoire of this kitchen (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015), which includes not only Polish and English, but also the intermittent use of other languages, including names of ingredients, food and artefacts such as *formaggio* and *moussaka* as well as the use of non-linguistic resources and shared cooking practices. Not only are the kitchen staff getting things done through their use of a diversity of available linguistic resources, but their understanding of this fluid language use is also open to considerable negotiation. Thus, as Nischal continued to describe his linguistic repertoire, it turned out that his knowledge of Polish predated his work with the brothers in this particular kitchen: “I had Polish friends before them as well”. Asked how good Nischal’s Polish was, another Polish worker, Tomek, present in the restaurant told us “It’s very good. For first study it’s very good”. Recapping part of an earlier discussion where they had gently argued about the percentage of Polish he understood (and where his earlier claim to understand 40% of the Polish used was negotiated down to 25%), Nischal conceded “OK, 25. If he says 25, it’s 25, because he would know better than me. It’s his language, so… Yeah, but I speak only, like, 3-5 per cent”.

On the one hand, we might view this discussion of language use as highly normative in terms of named languages and percentages, yet it is also clear on the other hand that such claims are highly contingent on a range of factors. Like the Fijian construction worker, Nemia, who is capable of negotiating his linguistic repertoire down from an initial sixty languages to ‘maybe twenty’, Nischal is quite content to move from 40% to 25% (it’s not ‘his language’ after all) and then to point out that this only refers to listening rather than speaking (3-5%), and that it doesn’t matter much anyway because they’re busy cooking. While on one level, then, his lists of languages represent a particular take on a languagised world, it is also clear that these languages are not the languages of public discourse and language policy (where countries, people and institutions may be firmly mono-, bi-, tri- or multilingual): these are mobile linguistic items that are part of an ever-changing repertoire of resources, and the way they talk about their languages is deeply influenced by other people, situations, activities and space. That is to say, the ways they talk about language use – their linguistic ideologies – are in part emergent from the discussions themselves. The terms they use may be drawn from the languagised world but the language ideologies are much more locally produced.

Such shifts in understanding and talking about language use in the multilingual workplace are not uncommon. In another restaurant in an area of Sydney known for Latin American shops and restaurants, the owner of a restaurant explained that since a large part of the clientele, particularly at lunch time, are either Colombian like herself, or at least Spanish-speaking from other Latin American countries, Spanish is used “a hundred per cent” in the restaurant.

Excerpt 3. Interview Columbian Restaurant, 23 March 2012. (O: Restaurant owner; R: Researcher)

1. O: A hundred per cent.
2. R: A hundred per cent?
3. O: Yeah, a hundred per cent.
4. R: So all the staff are Spanish-speakers,
5. O: No, no. Ah, the staff is from Indonesia. So we speak English, yeah. But they understand everything all our menu’s in Spanish and you tell them, like, to do this in Spanish dish, and they do it. They’re very good.
6. R: Right, so they’ve actually picked up quite a lot of Spanish? Interesting, interesting. So in the restaurant then you would have … you speak English to the Indonesian staff, and then they speak Indonesian to each other, and then you speak Spanish to the Spanish-speakers… Right. So there’s always the three.
7. O: Yes yes.

In the short space of this interview, this 100% Spanish-speaking restaurant shifted to one using Spanish as the main language of interaction between staff and clientele, English and Spanish as the language of mediation in the restaurant (the Indonesian staff had picked up some Spanish terms for dishes, numbers and so on) and Indonesian. Both researcher and restaurant owner are quite comfortable using the terminology of this languagised world, yet both soon come to the revelation that it’s far more complex than this (without even opening up the question of what is in fact meant by ‘Indonesian’: the fact that the kitchen staff were Indonesian does not guarantee a shared first language).

This renegotiation of the languages used in the restaurant might be put down to an initial misunderstanding between the researcher and the restaurant owner: She had assumed that our interest in this Columbian restaurant was in its non-Englishness and therefore emphasized its Spanish orientation. It is this kind of representation that is at stake here, however, since our interest is in the ways in which a description of language use can change. This restaurant owner’s view is somewhat different from that of a Vietnamese restaurant owner in the US: ‘I’ve got Pakistani, Indian, Vietnamese, Spanish. Nobody could do their jobs if we didn’t all speak English,’ (Dvorak 2012: np). Here a particular language ideology suggesting that everyone needs to speak English to understand each other (this example was used in a discussion of a decision to make English the official language in the local county in Maryland) clearly predominates over a discussion of the possibility of a more flexible multilingualism. This, then, is a differently languagised world, where kitchen multilingualism is discounted in favour of a view that everyone must share a language in order to communicate.

Clearly, however, this one-kichen-one-language ideology is not the only way to think about the multilingualism of kitchen staff. After suggesting that most of his kitchen staff were Japanese (“S: キッチンは, まあ, 日本人がほとんどなんですけど”, *the kitchen is, well, mostly Japanese but*), the owner of a sushi restaurant in Sydney then acknowledged greater diversity in his staff (Chinese and Koreans), suggesting that as a result English was a common language of the kitchen:

Excerpt 4. Interview Sushi Restaurant, August 12, 2013 (S: Sushi restaurant owner; R: Interviewer, Translation in *italics* in brackets.)

1. S: チャイニーズの子とコリアンの子も働いてるんで,   
    (*Chinese and Korean are also working so,*)
2. R: うん. (yup)
3. S: で, その子たちがいる時は大体英語になっちゃうんですよね.   
    (*so, when they are around, it becomes mostly English.*)

In a somewhat similar fashion to the Vietnamese restaurant owner cited above, he falls back on the initial assumption that if it isn’t one language (Japanese) that is shared among kitchen workers, then it must be another (English). As he reflects further on language use in the kitchen, however, he observes that the Korean workers learn Japanese (or at least ‘half Japanese’) very quickly (“S:日本語を半分覚えるんですよ、すぐ” *They remember half Japanese, immediately*) and that the language of the kitchen is really therefore a ‘mix’ of languages (“S:ほんとにミックスになります”, *it really becomes a mix*). And thus:

Excerpt 5. Interview Sushi Restaurant, August 12, 2013 (S: Sushi restaurant owner; R: Interviewer, Translation in *italics* in brackets.)

1. S:もう日本語が飛び交ってるから、...だから、日本語と英語とコリアンとなんか混ざった、なんか、 (*Japanese is flying around. So Japanese, English and Korean are somewhat mixed*)
2. R:ええ,　おもしろい (right interesting)
3. S:[Laughs]すごい言葉になってます[Laughs] (*It’s become an extreme language*)

We see a shift here from an assumption that English is the inevitable language of a multilingual kitchen to an acknowledgement that the staff in fact use an ‘extreme language’ (“すごい言葉”), a mixture of Japanese, English and Korean. Within a short period of time, the ideology of assigning one particular language as a lingua franca has changed to a more flexible metrolingual ideology, where the lingua franca is now a conglomeration of mixed language, a *multilingua franca* of interactions (Makoni and Pennycook 2012).

This remark about ‘extreme language’ echoes to some extent those made by a French bistro owner of Algerian-Moroccan background in Tokyo when he described the communication style between his workers where no one single ‘common language’ is shared. He explains that when two staff, a Japanese manager (Mr. Hata) and a French speaking chef, who do not share a ‘language’, communicate there is still “No problem. Even just Hata and Chef, they can communicate. Sometimes with hand, sometimes with international language” and “communication between the two is good” (Nabil, interview, December 27, 2011). For him, the communication is not exclusively carried out through ‘language’ in a normative sense but through drawing on all sorts of semiotic resources including gestures and even feelings: “If they [customers] don’t speak [French or English], I just feel what they say. I don’t understand, really, 100 per cent, but I can feel them because it’s my business, it’s 25 years in a restaurant, and I feel Japanese customers sometimes what they want, even [if] I don’t understand” (Nabil, interview, December 27, 2011).

While the readiness of these workers to discuss and negotiate their language use in such percentage terms or language patterns is in itself intriguing (as part of popular discourse or local language ideologies), such comments – as with the 100% Spanish restaurant discussed above – of course do little to capture the nature of actual linguistic interactions. These observations also suggest, however, that it is not only language that is in flux in such contexts but also language ideologies. The notion of language ideologies, particularly when understood in terms of “entrenched beliefs” (Seargeant 2009: 27) about language, is often assumed to be a cornerstone of language fixity: language labels are held in place by their ideological positioning. Yet the examples above suggest either that language ideologies may be fairly flexible – the shifts people make in their discussion of language use indicate these beliefs are not so entrenched – or that people may have a range of ideologies available for thinking about language – the shifts people make are discursive moves that mobilise other ideologies. There may be a tendency to fall back on apparently normative positions – “the language in the kitchen is Polish”, “the kitchen is, well, mostly Japanese” – but these positions are quickly up for renegotiation.

**4 Lingoing beyond fixity and fluidity**

In response to the apparent disjuncture between an emphasis on fluid language use, where people use any language resources at their disposal, and the fixity of institutional language orientations, where languages are viewed along normative, statist lines, we have elsewhere (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010, 2014) proposed that this can be understood in terms of fixity and fluidity: any understanding of the dynamics of contemporary language use needs to account for the push and pull between fluid and fixed language use and descriptions. Just as the fluid language practices of workplaces have been a major focus of metrolingual studies, so we cannot ignore the continued deployment of fixed categories of linguistic and cultural identity if we are to account for the ways in which language operates in relation to the city.

Language practices and identity are formed in a constant push and pull between fixity and fluidity. Like Rampton (2011), we see the dangers of an overemphasis on fluidity, since it may highlight only the possibility and the desire to operate in a world of constant flexibility. We may, as Appadurai (1996) noted, live in a world of flows, but we also live in a world of fixities. Not only are there political and economic limits to the degrees to which language and cultures can ebb and flow, but there are also strong attachments to fixed identifications. These attachments in turn reproduce normative language categories and ideologies that people mobilise when they talk about language. Thus, even when people attest to the creative possibilities of language diversity, the fixed identities and categories that they wish to resist can be equally reinforced. So when participants negotiate percentages of languages spoken, they are dealing in both fixed and fluid terms. As we have argued elsewhere (Otsuji and Pennycook 2014), this is part of the dilemma of the invocation of hybridity: In the same moment that a claim is made to hybridity, a simultaneous use of the components of hybridity (the mixing of this or that language, for example) restates the conditions of fixity.

Such fixed language identifications are still very real as part of the discursive world in which we operate, and these categories may equally and simultaneously be deployed by those who also revel in the fluidity and conviviality of everyday multilingualism. Part of the metrolingual endeavour therefore explores ways in which the assumed connections between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography are produced, resisted, defied or rearranged (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Just as elements of linguistic and cultural fixity may be mobilised as part of metrolingualism, so metrolingual language use may have to confront its static nemesis, the fixed identity regulations of institutional modernity. When judgments in law courts, educational systems, asylum tribunals, job interviews or hospital waiting rooms are brought to bear on metrolingual language use, the full discriminatory apparatus of the state and the inadequacy of popular discursive constructions of difference all too often work against such fluidity.

This formulation only takes us so far, however, since it constructs the relationship between a polarity of fixity and fluidity, and thus, amongst other things, does not sufficiently account for a greater complexity of intersecting practices and ideologies. It also runs the danger of not engaging with the epistemological and ontological questions about what is meant by ‘language’ in the mouths of different people. Addressing the disjuncture between ‘folk’ beliefs about language and frameworks derived from various research orientations (cf. Rampton 2007), Sealey (2007) offers a different way forward by suggesting “a stratified ontology which would allow for analytical distinctions to be drawn between the claims made about language as these relate to different domains of reality” (650). Sealey’s sociolinguistic realism (reality has an existence independent of how we describe it but our descriptions are inevitably discursively mediated) presents us with a tempting way forward so that we can “distinguish between competing accounts and descriptions in part by recognizing that they are accounts of different kinds of things” (650-651). In other words, the analysis does not stop at the recognition of discursively constructed realities but instead suggests that these are “attempts to describe phenomena that do exist independently of our descriptions of them” (651).

Another example can help shed light on the dilemmas here. The descriptions of the linguistic makeup of one of the markets in Sydney (Pennycook and Otsuji 2014) by Joseph, who owns the cafes at either end of this giant warehouse, appear at first linguistically normative. “But if between a buyer and a seller that is a common language of their background is spoken they do use it, OK, they feel more comfortable, they feel more comfortable lingoing in their own language” (Joseph, interview, August, 8, 2012). The two dominant languages of the market are Lebanese Arabic and Cantonese, though this varies by area, “Door 1, 2, down to door 5 – very very populated area with Lebanese background people. And they use, very often they use broken English and lingo in Lebanese. Past that area there’s no traders of Lebanese people, so we go back to different nationalities. Maltese, Italian, Greeks, we go back and use our common language, our first language is English” (Joseph, interview, August 8, 2012). At weekends it changes too “on a Saturday, it goes back to a different languages, more Italians and Greeks and so on”.

Joseph’s choice of expressions such as “lingoing in their own language” and “lingo in Lebanese” suggests that different market traders use their own languages for intra-ethnic communication and English for inter-ethnic communication. Closer observation, however, reveals that there are in fact far more complex sets of linguistic, regional, religious and migrationary affiliations across the workforce than the surface interpretation of “different nationalities” and “lingo in Lebanese”. One of the stalls in the ‘Lebanese’ section, for example, has seven employees of Turkish, Pakistani, Moroccan, Sudanese-Egyptian, Somalian and Filipino backgrounds. So the ‘Lebaneseness’ of this section of the market is also constructed from a sense of Lebanese being the default Arabic community in Sydney. Thus, the seemingly fixed identification of ‘Lebanese’ language and ethnicity is in fact a far less stable organisation of diverse linguistic resources that may gather under a variety of religious, linguistic, migratory and employment relations.

We can interpret Joseph’s explanation in terms of enregisterment (Agha 2007; Madsen 2015): “broken English” and “Lebanese” are ways in which he and others describe and fix certain language practices in the local context of the market. These are clearly language ideological positions that draw on particular ways of framing language and ethnicity. As linguistic ethnographers, we view these descriptions as useful in themselves, though not necessarily in accordance with how we understand the language practices amid the linguistic diversity either within the ‘Lebanese’ section or when we consider seriously what is meant by “broken English”. At the same time the notion of “lingoing” seems to suggests a way of thinking in line with the idea of “languaging”: the idea that “language users employ whatever linguistic features are at their disposal with the intention of achieving their communicative aim” (Jørgensen 2008: 169). While the term always appears attached to a language label (“lingo in Lebanese”), it also carries a sense of language as a social practice, of lingoing as an activity people are engaged in.

Ultimately, then, neither a sociolinguistic realism that insists on an underlying linguistic object of reality (a position that doesn’t help us when our focus is on language ideologies) nor a social constructivism that allows only for the idea that all understandings of language are socially mediated (a position that doesn’t help us when our focus is on real language practices) solves our questions about the relation between language practices and language ideologies. To get beyond this “hackneyed debate between scientific realism and social constructivism” (Barad 2003: 805) it is useful to talk up Latour’s (2004: 231) argument in favour of “a stubbornly realist attitude” that deals with “matters of concern, not matters of fact”. For Latour the point is to take up a new form of realism focusing not so much on the conditions of possibility for facts to be so but rather to engage in a “multifarious inquiry” (2004: 246) drawing on diverse modes of research to understand how different participants (broadly understood) converge to render things as things.

Rather than reproducing the error of constructivist critique that assumed no way of criticizing matters of fact other than by focusing only on the conditions that made them possible, it is more fruitful to take up the challenges of the new materialism (Barad, 2007) and to avoid the assumption that different ways of talking must be about different things (either in realist or constructivist terms). From this point of view, the “belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known” shows a “deep distrust of matter.” The “representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena is the metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs, perpetuating the endless recycling of untenable options” (2007: 133). For Barad, in a way not dissimilar to Latour, the way forward is not to recycle debates about constructivism and realism but instead to seek a way forward in which our “thinking, observing, and theorising” are understood as “practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (Barad: 2007: 133).

When people talk about their language use, they may mean all sorts of things by their naming of languages, their descriptions of what they speak with whom, or their use of percentages. This is not to suggest that they are unreliable linguistic informants, nor to assume that as linguistic ethnographers we need to accept all such terms as social facts. Rather it is to acknowledge that these accounts of individual repertoires are a product of diverse life trajectories, different language practices and particular perspectives on language. We need to be able to accommodate a view that both Nischal’s view that Polish is the language of the kitchen and Aleksy and Krzysztof’s that it is English may be right. Not only is it the case that people in busy metrolingual workplaces (where only limited amounts of language use may be required) may find it unimportant in what language interactions occur, but it may also be true in a sense that one person’s Polish is another person’s English. Just as Walter (1988) suggests that the original *lingua franca* worked because of its “particular quality that each user thought that it was the other’s language” (216, our translation), so perhaps it is not so much about ‘which language’ is being used but what things are getting done with what language use.

Languaging (and perhaps “lingoing”) supersedes the recognition (or particularity) of languages. In this sense, it is not so much about which language is required to get cooking, digging the ground, dish-washing or vegetable-bartering done, but how different language resources and tasks interact. Thus, rather than focusing on categorizing and fixing language patterns or trying to identify language ideologies in a particular domain, it seems more useful to try to understand people’s perspective of language in relation to their local everyday practices and trajectories. This also points to the fact that languages are only one part of a multimodal, multitasking environment, and may have more or less relevance at any particular point in the action. What is at stake, therefore, is not so much a polarisation between fluid language use and fixed language ascriptions as a constant reconfiguration of language meanings.

**5 Conclusion**

So how do we make sense of the apparent disparity between our account of *metrolingual* workspaces and people’s accounts of languages in use shown above? People mobilise and relocalise language and cultural practices and refashion them in new contexts through everyday “lingoing” and “broken English”. Through such repetitions that imitate the ‘original’ fixed forms, new practices and styles are reproduced, relocated and transformed (Dovchin et al. 2015; Harissi et al. 2012). And it is not only the way people speak that is transformed but also the ways they talk about speaking. The seemingly fixed terms of popular linguistic discourse do not have stable referents (languages) as their objects. Their ideological positioning occurs amid a market place of metrolinguistic ideologies and is often open to negotiation, adaptation and change.

This is by no means to casually dismiss the fact that people talk using normative language labels, but rather to try to understand that the language labels they deploy are part of both the languagised (normative linguistic) and de-languagised (flexible metrolinguistic) worlds in which language practices occur. People often appear to talk in terms of fixed origins of language practices but these origins are perpetually in the complex process of becoming, through repetitive imitations and relocalisations in communicative events. Just as we can see languages as emergent from local language practices (it is the repetitive nature of practice that renders languages as seemingly structured and fixed; Pennycook 2010), so views on language (language ideologies) are emergent from talk about language. We need to understand the complexity of the interactive processes without dismissing normative labels and categories. People who work amid the give and take of everyday multilingualism may deploy apparently static language labels to describe their linguistic worlds but it also becomes clear that these labels are equally subject to the kind of metrolinguistic ideology negotiation that can render them good descriptors of everyday language practices.

In our discussion of metrolingualism, we do not eschew the use of language labels. The questions we have sought to bring to the notion of countable and nameable languages have to do with particular discourses about language that may be both linguistic and popular. These are the ways of framing languages as systems, as entities, as one half of bilingual competence and so on. This is arguably not what Joseph is doing in his use of phrases such as “lingo in Lebanese,” in his slightly derogatory “broken English,” in his focus on the practices of trading and the space in which all this occurs. He is talking rather about metrolingual practices, about trade and language, about mixing languages together (broken English) and about language as a social practice (lingoing in Lebanese). He might not do so in our terms, but his view of language is not so very far from our own.

This may be a languagised world, but we need to ask what is being done as people talk about languages in different ways. From the varied examples given in this paper, it becomes clear that although people talk in terms of languages (as do we) – English, Japanese, Polish and so on – as well as terms that from a linguistic point of view are slightly less recognisable as languages - Lebanese, Yugoslav, lingoing, extreme language – what they mean by such labels may be quite varied. The notion of metrolingualism emerged from several directions, including Maher’s discussion of metroethnicity (2005), Jørgensen on polylingualism (2008), Creese and Blackledge’s (2010) flexible bilingualism, and García’s (2009) translanguaging, but it also derived from our own linguistic ethnographies of workplaces in Sydney and Tokyo. While obviously not an ‘insider’ term, it nevertheless seemed to reflect insider perspectives on work and language, and in that sense it is not so distant from such local perspectives. People talk about their linguistic realities in terms of common language labels; we do not see metrolingualism as transcending this everyday linguistic realm so much as reinscribing it into an alternative way of thinking about local language practices.

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