

## Disputed dialects: Dimensionalisation of variation in Burarra (northern Australia)

In Maningrida, north central Arnhem Land, fourteen Indigenous languages are spoken, alongside English and a range of contact varieties, in a community of 2500 people. Interaction is characterised by high levels of individual multilingualism, as well as receptive multilingualism and code-mixing practices (Carew 2016; Elwell 1982; Singer & Harris 2016). Local language ideologies dictate that variation is dimensionalised according to patrilineal land-holding units, into what might roughly be called ‘dialects’, with linguistic boundaries “couched principally in the idiom of local geography” (Sutton 1991).

Work on dialects in contact has largely been concerned with monolingual or migrant communities in western contexts, where it has been (arguably) feasible to approach dialects as varieties of some superordinate language, and to consider linguistic accommodation to be the primary/only driver in shaping new varieties (Labov 2001, Trudgill 2008). While several important exceptions exist (e.g. Gumperz & Wilson 1971, Stanford 2007), many questions remain regarding variation in multilingual, non-western or Indigenous contexts. In this talk, I consider the case of variation and dialect contact within Burarra, the language with the largest speaker community in Maningrida. Burarra is commonly described by speakers as consisting of four major ‘dialects’: An-barra, Martay, Maringa (not always distinguished as a distinct dialect) and Gun-nartpa (often considered a distinct language), with each label referencing groups of clan estates further east in Arnhem Land. Variation within Burarra is chiefly lexical, with further more minor phonological and syntactic differences also evident. Against this backdrop, a newer variety of Burarra has emerged in the urban context of Maningrida, a product of dialect levelling, partially stabilised code-switching with English, and the privileging of shared cross-linguistic lexical stock in the region. While this newer variety is now the first language for some, the traditional ‘dialects’ still co-exist with it and are central identity categories, reproduced through “communities of descent” (Stanford 2009).

Using recent interactional and elicited language data, as well as interviews and more general ethnographic work in the community, I discuss the extent to which the extant and socially salient variation within the Burarra linguistic space can be said to be reflexes of the various attested Burarra cultural categories, and the means by which these broader categories are performed interactionally. These patterns of variation are contextualised within the ‘total semiotic fact’ (Nakassis 2016, following Silverstein 1985) of cultural and social identity practice in the Maningrida region. Ultimately I will argue that the nature and functioning of variation in the region issues a challenge to assumptions of indexicality and lectal coherence (Guy & Hinskens 2016) in the dialectology literature, and point to the need to problematise the role of accommodation in language contact more generally.

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