The role of registers in the dynamics of language contact

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In settings of language contact, speakers can access linguistic repertoires that transcend language borders. Compared to speakers from linguistically less diverse settings, this gives multilingual speakers a broader range of linguistic options and potential lexical and grammatical interactions, making contact settings particularly dynamic in terms of language variation and change. However, even under "monolingual" conditions, speakers make selective choices from their repertoire dependent on the communicative situation, leading to register-differentiated language use. Accordingly, it has been suggested to regard everyone as multilingual in the sense that they choose from a differentiated linguistic repertoire (e.g., Roeper 1999 for generative grammar, Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 2006 for sociolinguistics, Tracy 2014 for language acquisition, McSwann 2017 for contact linguistics).

In my talk, I examine the implications of these parallels, exploring the role of registers in the dynamics of language contact. I discuss patterns of language mixing vs. language separation as register markers, the interaction of noncanonical grammatical patterns with register in bi- and monolinguals (cf. Wiese et al. 2022), and the impact of the societal macro context on heritage language registers, and on the emergence of urban contact dialects in informal settings (Kerswill & Wiese 2022).

To account for the role of registers, I propose a model that includes communicative situations in lexical entries, captures registers as systematic linguistic choices associated with such situations, and understands languages as social indeces (cf. Wiese 2021). I show that this allows for a unified approach to multilingual and monolingual repertoires while capturing the special dynamics of language contact.

From a broader perspective, this approach is in line with recent calls to understand contact settings as the normal condition of human language use and to overcome deficit-oriented perspectives on multilinguals in favour of a more inclusive approach to native speakers (e.g., Wiese et al. 2022, Rothman et. al. to appear).

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