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Editorial

On the (re-)production and representation of endangered language communities: Social boundaries and temporal borders

1. Shifting concepts of language and community

Conceptualizations of language and community have mirrored changes in anthropology and the social sciences more generally, shifting from notions of shared linguistic structures, norms, and values in specific regions to complex variation, diverse practices, and multifaceted ideologies across contexts. These evolving changes, of course, were not due solely to ongoing theoretical percolations but also to permutations and complications in the types of language communities that were receiving analytical attention. Once bounded and mostly homogeneous, language communities that began to be analyzed were increasingly in contact with the hybridizing forces of immigration, culture contact, national media penetration, and globalization. But the most recent challenge to the study of language communities comes from scholars attempting to understand the confluence of all these forces in processes of language endangerment. This special issue is dedicated to the exploration of the ways studying endangered language communities makes us rethink the notion of speech or language community both in terms of how those communities construct themselves and how they can be understood and represented by researchers.

Since the 1930's, scholars in the language sciences have engaged in an increasingly sustained preoccupation with concepts that connect language and community. This began with Bloomfield's (1933) groundbreaking conceptualization of a "speech-community" as "a group of people who interact by means of speech" (p. 42), which he highlights as "the most important kind of social group" (p. 42). His description privileges speech over other forms of language-in-interaction, and does little to acknowledge the complexities of communities that have fragile connections to a common language. In his discussion, he emphasizes the varying sizes of speech-communities and the difficulty of making distinctions within and among these groups. One of his primary interests is in density of communication, recognizing that various members of these groups have more or less interaction with one another. He also discusses issues of standard language, native language, local dialects, immigration, and language attitudes. Bloomfield's important work laid the foundation for a variety of scholars' later instantiations of the concept.

Building upon Bloomfield's work, Gumperz (1968, p. 43) defined speech community as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage". This more complex characterization also acknowledged the *amount* of interaction as a key component and the elements of what makes speech community members similar to each other and distinctive from others. However, Gumperz's focus on what is shared does not emphasize sufficiently the variation *within* speech communities, something that is especially relevant in communities around endangered languages. For example, later pioneering work by Dorian (1982) considered variability within speech communities, introducing terms such as low-proficiency "semi-speaker" and "near passive bilinguals" in relation to Gaelic and English. This acknowledgment of complexity within a speech community, in particular one focused on an endangered language, is valuable. However, in many ways it still holds full fluency and native speakerness as implicit norms and goals.¹

In her editorial introduction to a Journal of Linguistic Anthropology special issue on language and community, Irvine (1996) notes, "the one language-one culture assumption persists in anthropology and elsewhere, both within and outside the academy, despite the long history of arguments against it" (p. 123). She highlights the "semiotic processes...linguistic phenomena and discursive practices" (p. 124) that are central to notions of community. In this way, she acknowledges previous moves toward a more complex understanding of language and community, and pushes the field forward in its conceptualizations.

¹ For further discussion about how to represent "semi-speakers" and other types of intra-community linguistic variation, see such sources as Tsitsipis (1989) and Sallabank (2010).

Silverstein (1996), in a highly influential piece that distinguishes among the notions of speech community, language community, and linguistic community, emphasizes that *community* membership is a matter of degree. This provides another valuable perspective, and highlights the centrality of language ideologies of differentiation and membership in language communities.

Emphasizing communicative action, Duranti (1997, p. 83) focused on speech community as “the product of the communicative activities engaged in by a given group of people”. This conceptualization allows for a range of ‘communicative activities’, and emphasizes that communities do not simply exist but they are created through interaction. This definition of speech community provides useful elements that can capture the complex interactions that exist within endangered language communities.

Further refining his analytic concepts, Silverstein (1998, p. 407) makes a distinction between speech community and linguistic community, noting “the speech community is the context of emergence, sustenance, and transformation of distinct local language communities”. He defines linguistic community as “groups of people by degree evidencing allegiance to norms of denotational...language usage” (Silverstein, 1998, p. 407). This definition therefore privileges shared ideologies in relation to norms of use. As Friedman (2009) notes,

What unites a linguistic community is not a set of language practices but a set of language ideologies that define what counts as legitimate language. In the modern nation-state, this language is the national language(s) that has been standardized and legitimated through institutionalization in government, media, and education. (p. 2)

Within many endangered language contexts, ideologies and norms of usage are diverse, since community members have a range of proficiency levels in the language and practices around language.

Morgan (2006) builds upon previous research by acknowledging the role of power inherent in speech communities: “speech community represents the location of a group in society and its relationship to power...[which] is important to understand how social actors move within and between their speech communities” (p. 16). And more recently, Morgan (2014) notes that speech communities are “groups that share values and attitudes about language use, varieties, and practices” (p. 1). This sharing can occur during intensive interactions across diverse contexts, face-to-face and/or online, and it embodies the ways that language shapes group membership.

While many of the earlier definitions of speech community throughout much of the 20th century have focused on “shared” traditions and norms (like standardization) associated with modernity, in his elegant synthesis of “speech community” concepts in ethnography of speaking and variationist sociolinguistics Rampton (2009) usefully observes that late modernist and post-modernist forces have continued to reshape notions of the speech community into the late 20th and early 21st centuries. He describes a “linguistics of contact” that does not take the native speaker of one group as the norm in the contemporary age. Recent movements emphasizing “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Bucholtz, 1999a,b) and language ideologies have provided resources that can be used to recontextualize notions of the speech community and adapt them to the changing terrain of endangered language communities. From “community of practice” approaches comes an ability to better deploy analytic devices emphasizing complementary interactional practices, the social distribution of knowledge, the creation of group identities through activities, and an interest in evolving cultural reproduction. From language ideological approaches springs the opening of such considerations as the role of a local metasemiotics and other language beliefs and feelings that underlay the very construction of community and one’s place in it.

2. Endangered language communities: contemporary conceptualizations

The development of the “speech community” notion over the past decades therefore both informs and problematizes our understanding of endangered language communities. On the one hand, one can focus on the *practices* individuals engage in and on the other hand on the *phenomenological* view, the “acting, feeling and thinking, language-knowing self” (Rapport and Overing, 2000, p. 97). For many endangered language community members, it is a *lack* of interactions with other language users that creates a deeply felt sense of loss. This dearth of physical interaction in the present may be related to the extensive mental effort spent attempting to connect with imagined past communities. Within these communities there is thus a complex connection among phenomenology, interaction, and ideology that can create and maintain fragile relationships with the past, present, and future (discussed in more detail below in relation to the special issue themes).

Recently, a number of scholars have examined the discourse around language endangerment (cf. McEwan-Fujita, 2011) and the ways this may in fact create barriers to desired linguistic and communal outcomes (Hill, 2002; Duchene and Heller, 2008; Perley, 2012). For example, Leonard (2011) espouses the use of the term “reclamation” (and its associated practices) as a way to combat notions of linguistic extinction in the case of the Miami language.² In particular, he acknowledges the unique

² However it would be wrong to fully equate “reclamation” with revitalization especially in the case of Miami (Myaamia), which would have been conventionally classified as an extinct language for more than two decades before it was re-awakened by Daryl Baldwin from previous documentation. Leonard’s preference for “reclamation” provides yet another alternative to death imagery even though the more culturally sensitive “sleeping” (rather than extinct) languages naturally suggests re-awakening (Hinton and Hale, 2001, p. 413–7). “Reclamation” as a concept may erase any emphasis on interruption and this might serve the community building/identity conferring project of the Myaamia community. For researchers taking a comparative perspective, however, the distinction between those who speak a language as a first or second language may still be important and consequential.

mixture of “traditional” and “modern” practices in endangered language communities, highlighting the ways that previous conceptualizations meant to measure the “health” of a language have not actually captured what happens in the communities that are invested in that health.

In their discussion of endangered languages and language revitalization efforts, [Grenoble and Whaley \(2006\)](#) employ the term “local community”, “that group of people who have some claim on a local language, either because of historical-cultural connections to it, ethnic connections to it, or an ability to speak it” (p. 16). The idea that there may be a number of different reasons why an individual has a “claim” on the language is especially relevant, as it highlights the centrality of time (historical connections and/or present-day use). However, “local” community does not acknowledge the “mass mediation of communities” ([Spitulnik, 1996](#)) or connections to other groups (c.f. [Avineri, in this issue](#); [Barchas-Lichtenstein, in this issue](#)) that seem to be an undeniably influential force that affects the vast majority of language communities in a globalized world, perhaps especially those experiencing endangerment and/or revitalization.

This special issue therefore focuses on the complex relationships among time, space, practice, and ideology within endangered language communities. Through the analysis of six distinct yet theoretically connected case studies (Ahlers, Avineri, Barchas-Lichtenstein, Kroskrity, Meek, Nonaka), we seek to highlight what is unique about the diverse interactions and ideologies of differentiation in these communities. In addition, cross-cutting themes of temporal border-crossing and group boundary-creation provide models for broader phenomena within communities across the globe.

3. Constructing social boundaries, crossing temporal borders

In contrast to language endangerment, especially that of indigenous languages, which is a longer historical process often associated with modernity and the phenomenon of nationalism, language revitalization may be better viewed as a part of a post-modern movement associated with the intensified circulation of people, texts, objects, and ideas. This flow, in its most inclusive sense, is usually described as the sociolinguistics of globalization ([Blommaert, 2010](#)). Forces of globalization, whether political economic or cultural, have the capacity to both promote language shift through the production and intensification of social inequality but they can also deliver discourses of language rights ([Whiteley, 2003](#); [Errington, 2003](#)), models of language documentation (e.g. [Himmelmann, 2008](#)) and “best practices” of language revitalization (e.g. [Hinton and Hale, 2001](#)). Endangered language communities and their members typically live in a world of unprecedented levels of cultural contact in which their languages are deployed with a high degree of awareness and in situations where linguistic forms are being recruited to mark community boundaries and to make identities within them. These are the communities in which relying on shared traditions for demarcation no longer seems especially viable. Relevant, semiotically constructed, social boundaries between communities may not be highly visible (to outsiders) or even phenomenally overt. Yet many speech communities still see themselves as bounded, unified, and centered in ways that may defy the external analyst’s gaze. How can we develop or evolve a concept of the speech community that is flexible enough to accommodate the diversity, complexity, and discursive consciousness of linguistic and semiotic resources that are being used to construct such communities?

The answer seems, in part, to continue down a path suggested by the language ideological direction of some research on this topic. A full confrontation with members’ “beliefs and feelings” about language ([Kroskrity, 2010](#)) suggests the profitability of greater reliance on a more phenomenological approach to speech communities. Moving toward the subjective, experience-based understandings and away from the objectivist reliance on linguistic sharing and overt interactional boundaries may sound like an intellectual shift that can only produce disorder in a once highly orderly domain. But ultimately we think it can be demonstrated that two related themes, however experiential and subjective in nature, still serve to provide a measure of sense and order and may be helpful in recognizing how these endangered language communities make themselves in our postmodern age.

One of the two interrelated phenomenological processes we will discuss here involves the creation of social boundaries and bridges between and across communities. The other involves the historical orientation of community members through their subjective histories and the imagined pasts, presents, and futures in which they locate themselves. Regarding social boundaries, we can most efficiently trace the course of contemporary trends by beginning with [Fredrik Barth \(1969\)](#) and his landmark book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Though received wisdom on “ethnic groups” in the so-called “ideal-type definition” focused on their being 1) mostly self-perpetuating as a biological population, 2) sharing fundamental cultural values and overt cultural forms, 3) composing a field of communication and interaction, and 4) having “a membership which identifies itself and is defined by others, as a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order” ([Barth, 1969](#), p. 10–11). Such definitions were minor permutations of a traditional, primordial folk proposition that identified ethnic groups in the following equation: a race = a culture = a language. This definition furthermore assumed that societies were completely homogenous and discriminatory against other, especially neighboring, social groups.

The importance of Barth’s approach to ethnic identity emerges from his refocusing investigation on the importance of ethnic boundaries—the semiotic basis that allowed members to distinguish themselves, and their “we” group, from others that were excluded from that group. This emphasis recognized the importance of self-ascription and members’ own ethno-semiotics of identity. In sum, the focus of attention was not the stuff that could be objectively cataloged as ethnic differences (in language, dress, and cultural practices) but rather the stuff that members understood as what Barth termed ethnic *diacritica*—the diagnostic, or emblematic, differences that provided overt criteria for boundary maintenance between groups ([Barth, 1969](#), p. 14). The superiority of Barth’s understanding of ethnic groups in relation to the “ideal-type” or folk definitions previously mentioned is most evident in contact situations. For ethnic groups that are either geographically isolated or

isolated by some theoretical predilection, boundary maintenance may not be problematic.³ Yet in the contemporary period few, if any, groups experience such isolation. Instead the forces of modernity like nationalism and increasing globalization promote intensive contact, dislocation, migration, national and global flows of cultural others, objects, and ideas. Yet as the distinctive semiotic features that distinguish groups diminish with regular contact, members still find criteria for boundary maintenance, in part, through the elevation of some persisting differences—like language—to the status of emblems of ethnicity. As Barth (1969, p. 15–6) observed:

Entailed in ethnic boundary maintenance are also situations of social contact between persons of different cultures: ethnic groups only persist as significant units if they imply marked difference in behavior, i.e. persisting cultural differences. Yet where persons of different cultures interact, one would expect these differences to be reduced, since interaction both requires and generates a congruence of codes and values ...

In calling attention to the importance of what Barth calls self-ascription and the transformation of some ethnic differences into “emblems,” Barth anticipates more recent language ideological work that calls attention to the role of socially conditioned beliefs and feelings about language in acts of linguistic differentiation (Irvine and Gal, 2000). Research on the language ideological construction of linguistic boundaries refines Barth’s emphasis on semiotic processes relevant to linguistic differentiation including such processes as erasure, iconization, and fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal, 2000). These processes provide semiotic resources that members use to construct the diagnostic differences that both rationalize and naturalize the boundaries between groups of varying scale.

While an emphasis on boundaries is a critical feature of recent attempts to define cultural groups and communities not by what they share internally but rather through their ideological construal of boundaries, this focus enables not only an understanding of boundary construction but of crossing as well. Approaches that have featured the alternation of social identities (as in Kroskrity’s (1993)) “repertoire of identity,” the “crossing” of ethnic boundaries to create a hybrid school culture (Rampton, 1995, 2008), and “styling the other” (Bucholtz, 1999a; Lo, 1999) illustrate the possibility of different kinds of border crossings. In such studies, of course, the borders being crossed are contemporary sociocultural ones but these are not the only relevant border crossings when it comes to the construction of group and individual identities.

In addition to the construction of social boundaries, relevant borders for the production of community, may be temporal in nature. History, the subjective history experienced and/or imagined by members of particular groups, often involves crossing temporal borders and connecting with an ancestral community (Eisenlohr, 2004, 2006; Basso, 1996; Kroskrity, 1993). Connections to a highly valorized ancestral community (Avineri, 2012; Basso, 1996; Eisenlohr, 2006), whether through discursive means (like historical tales (Basso, 1996), nostalgic narratives of family members (Avineri, 2012), ritual activity like pilgrimages (Eisenlohr, 2004), or material culture (such as monuments (French, 2012, p. 340)) provide potential semiotic resources for simultaneously crossing a temporal boundary to an ancestral one and constructing a boundary that excludes those outside of this temporal regime. To better understand how contemporary linguistic communities construct themselves we need to incorporate a more phenomenological approach in order to see how these subjects are engaged in the work of locating themselves, and their communities, in the negotiation of the disjuncture between subjective and cosmic time (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 245; Eisenlohr, 2006, p. 270). Ricoeur’s (1988) phenomenological approach to history helps us to understand the importance of regimes of temporalization as ways for group members to locate themselves in their subjective histories. Communities and their members distinguish themselves not only by activities in the present but also by creating a standpoint in the present that connects back to a remembered past and forward to an imagined future. Historical consciousness of this type must therefore join linguistic mediation (Anderson, 1991) as a way of forming distinctive social identities. Anderson had argued that modernity and nationalism have been mediated by new literary genres that have produced a fundamentally new experience of time as “empty” and “homogeneous.” (Eisenlohr, 2004, p. 96). But Anderson’s view clearly minimizes the role of historical consciousness, as Eisenlohr (2004, p. 96) appropriately observes:

... Anderson’s narrowing down of the temporal dimension of the production of language-mediated imagined communities to linear, “empty, homogeneous” time fails to capture certain forms of time reckoning that are at the heart of modern ways of ethno-national identification. As Anderson and other scholars of nationalism have pointed out, the object of national devotion and identification, the nation and its people, are often represented as possessing considerable antiquity, despite their often manifest novelty. Conceiving a community of nationals on their linear march through history is not the only way to relate to the imagined antiquity of such communities; equally important are ritualized moments of communion with the ancestors, suspending the spatiotemporal remove of the present with their imagined national forebears. (Eisenlohr, 2004, p. 96).

Though Eisenlohr specifically addresses national and ethnonational identity in the extract above, his comments seem quite relevant to speech and/or linguistic communities—especially those challenged by circumstances of language endangerment.

³ As an example of isolation via “analytic predilection” we could view the Boasian practices of early anthropology as conforming. Ethnographers were encouraged to describe a culture not in some historical stage of culture contact with a particular nation-state but rather in some imagined pre-contact state. This practice produced the convention of what Fabian (1983) and others have called the trope of the “ethnographic present.” Clearly early anthropology made its “other”—the Native American cultures that were its living laboratory—through such tropes and the temporalizing regimes that distinguished those with history from those without (Wolf, 1982).

For such communities, the very fact of language endangerment is a prompt both for speakers to reflect on an emblematic language that can no longer be taken for granted and to reconsider the language and community in subjective historical time. As an endangered language becomes “marked” as no longer the default language in many functional contexts, the process of noticing its markedness becomes an occasion for discursive consciousness (Kroskrity, 1998) and both metalinguistic and metapragmatic commentary (Gomez de Garcia et al., 2009). Under such conditions, even minimal linguistic expression (Ahlers, 2006), or even “metalinguistic” participation (Avineri, 2012, in this issue), may be viewed as a semiotic resource for community identity production. This discursive consciousness will certainly connect with historical consciousness, as speakers deal with the problem of a threatened language. In various communities, the threat of endangerment will elicit a myth of origin, a moral challenge to remain connected to ancestral voices, or a sense of nostalgia for bygone days in which the language thrived as a medium of sociality (Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, 1998; Eisenlohr, 2006; Hill, 1998; Avineri, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). Such communities may also be concerned about the availability of language, going forward in time, for their children, grandchildren, and future descendants.

4. Articles in this special issue

Studies in this special issue provide a range of cases that illustrate the ways contemporary endangered linguistic and speech communities engage in processes of border and boundary creation and crossing. “Temporal regimentation” (Eisenlohr, 2004) figures prominently in articles by Kroskrity, Avineri, Ahlers, and Barchas-Lichtenstein with regard to language communities centered around the Tewa speaking community represented by the Village of Tewa (indigenous N. Arizona), the secular Yiddish “metalinguistic community”, a Pomo (indigenous California) language, and a Jehovah’s Witness community in Oaxaca, Mexico. Border crossings to both past and future, as well as group boundary creation, occur in the Village of Tewa, as represented in Kroskrity’s article “Borders Traversed, Boundaries Erected: Creating Discursive Identities and Language Communities in the Village of Tewa”. In a reservation minority community divided in two both in its social and ceremonial organization as well as in its politics of language renewal, members of the Village of Tewa erect language ideological borders not only between themselves and Hopis but also between the kiva groups that organize that society’s division into moiety groups. These kiva groups represent different sides in language ideological debates about the kinds of linguistic intervention that can be done in the name of language revitalization. Importantly, both groups build bridges to ancestral groups responsible for the “linguistic curse” that was meant to deny the Hopi majority access to Tewa language and culture and judge each other by their commitment to enforce this denial of access in the present. Orientation in subjective history also provides a key difference between the groups as they consider the future of their communities. Whereas the kiva group against documenting, recording, writing, and teaching the language in classroom settings primarily casts its glance back to an ancestral past, the other kiva group is imagining a future in which their children and grandchildren will be speaking the language.

Avineri’s paper, “Yiddish Endangerment as Phenomenological Reality and Discursive Strategy: Crossing into the Past and Crossing Out the Present,” examines the very different linguistic situations in Orthodox Hasidic Yiddish-speaking communities and secular Yiddish “metalinguistic communities”. Avineri’s notion of “metalinguistic community” provides a model for groups that experience a deep affective connection with a language even if many lack proficiency in it; these communities are frequently defined more by talk about a language than by talk in it. The article considers pervasive practices of “nostalgia socialization,” in classroom interactions, cultural events, and various media pieces. The analysis also emphasizes how metalinguistic community members may create bridges with historical Yiddish speaking communities in Europe prior to World War II, while constructing boundaries with vibrant United States ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in which Yiddish is used for various everyday functions—both a temporal and a spatial process. Furthermore, the metalinguistic community ironically displays considerable language ideological purism in its disapproval of the kind of linguistic adaptations that have allowed the ultra-Orthodox to add new words, including loanwords from English, and to speak a language that shows the influence of other languages. The metalinguistic community frequently rejects the linkage of Yiddish to ultra-Orthodox Judaism as well as linguistic practices it views as impure. In this way, it erects a boundary of exclusion with a community that shares a language ideological connection between Yiddish and group identity but may differ in its location of authentic speaking models. For the metalinguistic community, authentic usage is primarily modeled upon the valorized ancestral communities whereas the ultra-Orthodox are principally concerned with using their language in the present as an ethnic emblem that frequently excludes the dominant society. Lastly, in terms of methodology, the article highlights the problems associated with objectivist notions of endangerment, unless they are considered in conjunction with individuals’ experienced realities and discursive practices.

Ahlers’ paper, “Linguistic Variation and Time Travel: Barrier, or Border-Crossing?,” analyzes contrasting ideologies toward variation in two contracting speech communities in California. Morpheme-level differences, for example, become iconic of both past and present communities. In the case of Kawaiisu, language variation is viewed in a positive light, since individuality is valued. However, in the case of Pomo, language planners’ efforts to subsume seven language varieties into one language are seen as a mode of returning to a past when all Pomos could interact effortlessly. In this way, complex relationships with the past are negotiated in the present, among native speakers and language planners. For the Pomo communities, their project of crossing borders represented by regional differences in order to unify their communities and bring them closer together in the future is connected to their imagined, idealized past when all Pomo communities spoke a shared language. One could argue that this is both a Pomo presentist interpretation of the past—a myth that creates a charter for “returning” to this

imagined unity—and perhaps also the “trickle-down”, via fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal, 2000) of one language:one nation that is inscribed in dominant institutions of the United States and evidenced in other California indigenous groups like the Western Mono (Kroskrity, 2009).

The Jehovah's Witnesses community of highland Chontal (indigenous Oaxaca, Mexico) examined by Barchas-Lichtenstein in her article “Jehovah's Witness, Endangered Languages, and the Globalized Textual Community,” engage in considerable temporal regimentation as a means of selectively including members and excluding others. The Witnesses use their distinctive language ideologies about the need to speak a pure, transidiomatic, religious language as a means of distinguishing themselves from non-believers. Their language ideological beliefs in the importance of indigenous languages as the proper way to understand and feel the religious “word” motivate their maintenance of their ethnic language even though the translation of *Watchtower* texts can hardly be understood as a broadly based language revitalization effort. Their efforts can only be fully understood by examining their temporal regimentation of both past and future that for members of this group are especially related. These Jehovah's Witnesses act in the present by preparing for the end of days—the religious belief in a world-ending apocalypse in which the dead will be resurrected and judged. By speaking their ancestral language, members of this community can include their deceased ancestors among those who will be able to hear the word and experience the after-life of the selected few, a worldwide community of Witnesses, from 239 countries speaking almost 600 languages, who are united by the border crossing capacity of the pure language of their faith. The paper also highlights the standardized, centralized practices that unite the community worldwide while also demonstrating the ways that their linguistic practices are exceptionally localized, manifested by deep ideological affiliations with the community's endangered language of Chontal. The multifaceted nature and telescoping scale of many endangered language communities is treated in Meek's discussion of “nestedness”, and by Barchas-Lichtenstein's discussion of ‘communities within communities’. Many community members manage these multiple connections to both the global and the local by constructing bridges to a future time when all Witnesses will speak the heritage language.

Nonaka's and Meek's papers focus more heavily on issues of boundary creation between groups in the present, as opposed to the temporal border crossings discussed in the other papers. Nonaka's article on the Ban Khor Sign Language (BKSL) community, “(Almost) everyone here spoke Ban Khor Sign Language—until they started using TSL: Language shift and endangerment of a Thai village sign language,” demonstrates how boundary crossings were clearly involved in both the genesis of this village sign language but now figure prominently in its potential demise. A population with a high degree of hereditary Deafness and language ideologies that sought to include Deaf members rather than exclude them became a suitable environment for the development of an indigenous sign language, one that would also be learned as a second language by a significant number of hearing individuals in the community. Yet as urbanization and economic development in Thailand removed barriers of physical distance and media influence, Deaf signers become aware of Deaf communities outside of Ban Khor, communities that used Thai Sign Language. As Nonaka points out, the current language shift is driven by Ban Khor's Deaf community since they are now able to cross former village boundaries and sign the language of a national Deaf community. The only nostalgia for BKSL comes from the many hearing individuals who lack the motivation to enter a non-local Deaf community and find themselves increasingly disconnected from a Ban Khor Deaf community that prefers to use TSL.

Meek's article, “She can do it in English too: Acts of intimacy and boundary making in language revitalization,” examines the nested nature of group identity through her analysis of a convergence of indigenous modes of boundary marking. These are inflected through the bureaucratic regimentation of the Canadian government's language policy in the Yukon territory and its imposed emphasis on inclusiveness in the “We Are Our Language” program that covers eight aboriginal languages in the Yukon territory. Though inclusion is regimented by the state from above, Meek demonstrates how differentiation and difference are both bureaucratically imposed by state recognized ethnolinguistic categories and by distinguishing individuals with special linguistic expertise in these languages. In a close examination of actual language revitalization activities, Meek displays how a more strictly local indigenous politics gives disproportionate voice to powerful dialect groups while it works to suppress speakers from those of less standing. This type of micropolitics also articulates with temporal regimentation since it authenticates some speakers as worthy to tell their stories about a cultural past at the same time it prevents others from “preserving” their narratives for future generations.

This special issue therefore examines the various ways that endangered language communities construct themselves through diverse ideological and interactional moves. Each case study provides deep analytical detail about the creation and crossing of temporal borders and group boundaries. The experiences of these community members can thus illuminate how communities are created, produced, and reinvented as linguistic situations shift over time.

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