

'It's Kriol they're speaking!' – Constructing Language Boundaries in Multilingual and Ethnically Complex Communities

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Dieser Artikel zeichnet symbolische Grenzziehungen nach, die durch den Gebrauch der englisch-lexifizierten Kreolsprache *Kriol* in Belize, Mittelamerika, ausgedrückt werden. Grundlage hierfür sind empirische Daten, die in einer ethnographischen Feldforschung erhoben wurden. Aufgrund der vorherrschenden Mehrsprachigkeit und der ethnischen Vermischung der Bevölkerung in diesem offiziell englischsprachigen Land, ist die soziolinguistische Situation Belizes von besonderem Interesse für die Untersuchung sozialer Differenzierung durch Sprache. Sprachliche und ethnische Kategorien sind in Belize nicht in einem kongruenten Verhältnis zueinander. Während Englisch in schriftlichen und sehr formalen Kontexten vorherrschend ist, wird Kriol als orale lingua franca verwendet und hat sich – wie schon in den 1970er Jahren von Le Page und Tabouret-Keller (1985) belegt – zu einem Index für belizische Identität entwickelt. Jedoch befinden sich die Übergänge zwischen Standard Englisch und Kriol in einer Kontinuum-Situation und sind nicht klar strukturell unterschieden. Nichtsdestotrotz spielt Kriol eine zentrale symbolische Rolle in der Konstruktion von Zugehörigkeit und wird von Sprecherinnen als in einem binären Verhältnis zu Englisch wahrgenommen. Die Analyse wird in Beziehung gesetzt zu Überlegungen zur Konzeptualisierung von Sprachgrenzen in globalisierten und kulturell komplexen Kontexten in denen die Frage nach der Ontologie sozialer Gruppierungen und sprachlichen Systemen entsteht.

Stichwörter:

Mehrsprachigkeit, Sprachideologie, Grenzen, Ethnizität, Globalisierung.

1. Introduction – What is Kriol? What is English? And what is the boundary between them?

The central aim of this paper is to grasp how the boundary between two closely aligned languages – English and Belizean Kriol – is conceptualised and what it symbolically means to use either one or the other code in a particular local setting in Belize. While English is the official language of Belize and used in formal written communication and broadcasting, Kriol is an English-lexified Creole that has become the oral lingua franca of the country. It is imbued with local prestige and is frequently also used in more formal environments (e.g. in education, in the media, in parliament). The boundary between the two is hard to define as Kriol's lexicon is predominantly based on English, and some argue that "spoken English [in Belize] is simply a register of creole, relexified and restructured through contact with mainstream English." (Blench 2013). As a matter of fact, we could describe this situation also from the opposite perspective and claim creole to be a register of English.

The analysis of the construction of language boundaries and social differentiation in Belize is based on data from an ethnographic field study in a village in Belize, a nation that is characterised by its interethnic complexity and multilingual diversity. The aim of the overall research project is to study language ideological discourse in Belize in order to investigate the symbolic functions of language in a context in which languages and ethnic identities do not match. Language choice therefore does not necessarily express ethnic belonging. The study illuminates to which other social discourses languages are attached and which kinds of social boundaries can be expressed by language choice. It should be mentioned that in Belize, neither English nor Kriol are the demographically dominant languages but Spanish, while a large number of other languages is spoken in addition (see section 2). I will here concentrate on Kriol and ask who is constructed as user of Kriol, how the boundary between English and Kriol is conceptualised, and what the boundary means on social grounds. After insight into the setting of the study, demography and language use in Belize, and information on the methodological approach, I give access to data from interviews with local informants. The analysis is followed by a discussion, guided by the underlying theoretical interest of the study: how does the link of language and ethnicity emerge and what happens to it under conditions of globalisation?

2. Belize – Historical, Demographic and Sociolinguistic Insight

Belize has about 300.000 inhabitants and has been politically independent since 1981, when the colonial rule of Britain ended. Belize has been diverse at least since the start of colonial contact and ethnic mixings differ in different regions of the country (see e.g. McClaurin 1996: 31). Ethnic Creoles, descendants of Europeans and Africans, formed the political elite since a political movement for independence in the 1950s (see e.g. Barry 1995; Shoman 2011), while their current dominance status is contested. Belize City, the largest city of Belize and former capital, continues to be predominantly inhabited by Creoles. Yet, emigration of Creoles to the US and immigration from surrounding Hispanic countries already in the second half of the 19th century, and since the 1980s, has brought about a demographic shift towards Spanish-speakers (ibid.). It needs to be noted that it is not always easy to define who belongs to the social category of 'Spanish' – the term has gained (largely derogative) endogenous meanings and refers to people with non-Creole, non-'white' origins, which comprises people from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras but also from within Belize. The term of self-reference for non-black people with Hispanic ties in Belize is *Mestizo*, used to refer to various kinds of Hispanic and Maya heritage but potentially also other (including Creole) backgrounds. On grounds of ethnographic observation, it seems that individual skin complexion plays a crucial role in ethnic alignment so that siblings from a single family can declare different ethnic belongings. A large number of individuals is of mixed descent

and depending on complexion, social network and place of upbringing, it is not uncommon that, for example, people of predominantly Hispanic heritage (as e.g. indexed by their family names or self-reports of first language use) regard themselves as Creole – or vice versa. Ethnicity is thus a rather fluid category in Belize and the ethnic groups of Creole and Spanish/Mestizo, and to some extent also Garifuna (see below), display fluid boundary markings and have diverse and continuing transnational ties. As an effect of histories of colonial and postcolonial ethnic mixing and contemporary transnational relations, many Belizeans use three or four languages on a daily basis (Escure 1997: 28). Languages in Belize are thus not straightforwardly linked to ethnic categories, which leads to complicated and conflicting relationships between language and social categorisations.

To get a rough grasp of language use and the symbolic role of language choices in Belize, we can maintain that **English** is the official language; it is used in written form and in education (at least officially) but is typically not used in Belizean families. People are nevertheless proud to live in an English-speaking country, irrespective of their language practices. Attitudes towards English are positive and the ability to use what is locally referred to as 'proper English' has overt and formal prestige. **Kriol** (note that *Kriol* with the letter 'K' refers to the language, *Creole* refers to the ethnic group) is historically closely linked to Jamaican Creole (for a grammar of Kriol, see Decker 2013; for more sociolinguistic and linguistic insight, see e.g. Escure 1997) and, as mentioned, traditional Kriol speakers used to be the politically dominant group and are regarded to have been the demographic majority until recently (note that this is contested as, already in the second half of the 19th century, a large number of Hispanics and Yucatec Mayas entered the country as a cause of the Mexican *Guerra de las Castas* (Bulmer-Thomas 2012: 295). Kriol is so far only written by language activists, who have developed a Kriol orthography (see www.nationalkriolcouncil.org). Yet, Kriol is highly popular, acquired by the non-Creole population and very frequently used in public and less formal domains. **Spanish**, despite its demographic dominance, is often constructed as a 'foreign' language. Besides the political and social dominance of Creoles, this has to do with strong anti-Guatemalan sentiments as Guatemala does not fully recognise Belize's status as a state (see Shoman 2011). Presumably, it is also related to the lower class status of the more recent immigrants from surrounding countries who often-times come to Belize to flee very poor living conditions. **Garifuna**, an Afro-Carib-Arawakan language (Escure 2004) spoken predominantly in Belize, Honduras and New York, and other, lesser spoken languages, like the traditional Maya languages **Mopan**, **Yucatec**, **Queqch'i**, or immigrant languages like **German**, **Hindi**, **Mandarin**, **Cantonese**, **Taiwanese**, or **Arabic** are used by smaller segments of the population and are more directly understood as linked to ethnic background.

In order to study language ideologies in this diverse and multilingual setting, I conducted a three-months ethnographic field study in a village of about 1500 inhabitants located on an island. I collected observational, interview, focus group discussion and conversational data, and some quantitative data on language use across domains. Observation took place on the streets, in a kindergarten and in a high school. I recorded 20 hours of conversation in a high school and conducted 19 qualitative interviews, predominantly with village members, among them teachers and headmasters. The village is pervaded by the global tourism industry, where up to 100.000 tourists arrive annually. There are a number of people from North America and Europe who have chosen to live on the island and make a living in the tourism industry, which is the dominant job market also for locals. Due to the tourism industry, the island, owned by Hispanic and Yucatec-speaking people since the 19th century (today are categorised as *Mestizo*), has, since the 1970s, seen an influx of people from elsewhere in Belize (Kriol and Garifuna-speakers), from less well-off Spanish-speakers from surrounding nations, and from China as most supermarkets are owned by Chinese. Summarising, we can say that the place was predominantly Spanish/ Yucatec-speaking and has now become very diverse. Claiming a particular language as home language in interviews is not necessarily an indicator for cultural, ethnic or national background. It is neither an indicator for actual language use as the ideological level here strongly intervenes. People tend to say what they think they use, think they should use or think I think they should use. The overall situation is such that the term 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007) is applicable. Table 1 displays the reported home language use in 155 interviews of people residing in the village:

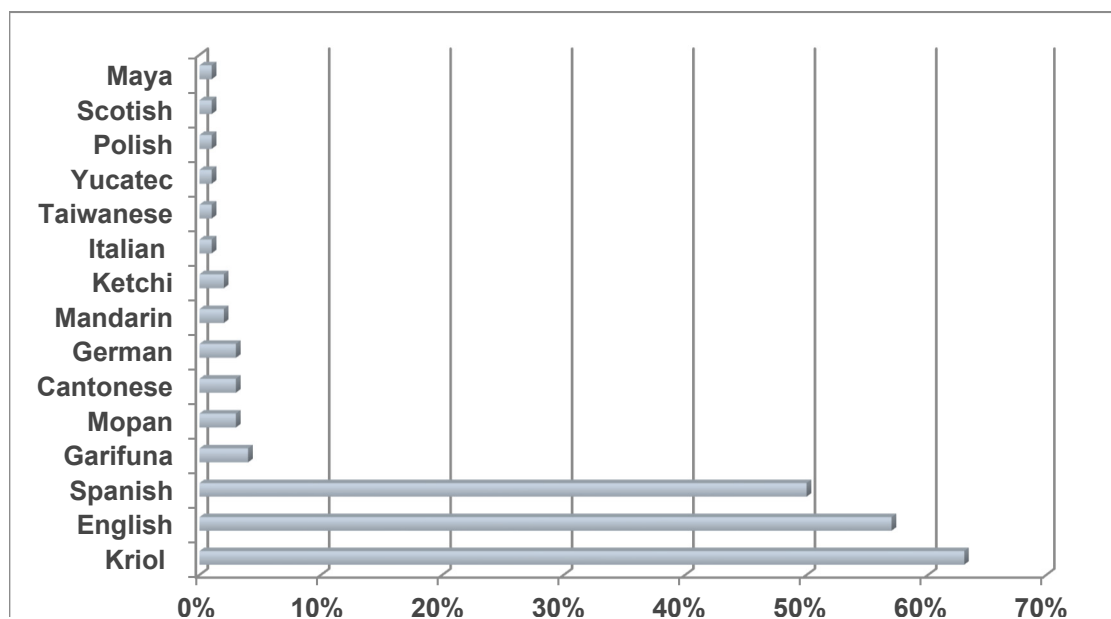


Table 1: Self-reported home languages of village citizens, several answers possible (n=155)

Note that most people report they use several languages at home where more than 60% of respondents indicate Kriol to be one of their home languages, more than 50% say they use English and almost 50% say they use Spanish. It is not clear which language practices are understood to relate to these terms emically by the respondents. As common practice in sociolinguistic research, I interpret these numbers to illustrate language attitudes rather than practices (see e.g. Ravindranath 2009: 126). Due to its important social functions, its everyday dominance and its intricate and complex history, I focus on the role of Kriol in the remainder of the article.

3. Kriol – What is Kriol? Who speaks Kriol? And what kinds of social differentiation does Kriol indicate?

As we have seen, social and linguistic categories are not easily mapped in a situation like Belize. The data introduced in the following has been therefore collected to understand how the users of the languages in Belize categorise their own language use and to which social discourses linguistic categorisations are linked. I give some examples that illustrate general trends and central observations in the data set.

First of all, irrespective of the official status of English and the dominance of Spanish, Kriol is constructed as the most commonly spoken language:

(1) Transcription

01 if Kriol is mo, the most, ah (2)
 02 the most common language on the (.) island,
 03 why don't they try enforce it, you know?
 04 it's easy, it's nice.
 05 that's how people get to know each other (1,5)
 06 like, you know, go up to someone and speak Kriol.
 07 that's gonna be nice.

Indeed, on grounds of observation, everyone who grows up in the village acquires Kriol, at latest in school where it is not taught but spoken. Kriol is an index of 'being Belizean' (already noted in LePage 1972), one reason being its use by the former social elite of Creoles, who are still regarded as legitimate successors of British settlers, from which they partly descend. Virtually everyone I spoke to has positive attitudes towards Kriol, irrespective of ethnic affiliation or home language use. This is indicated in the above quote where the interviewee – a young local woman with Hispanic, Garifuna and Creole family ties – displays her positive feelings in declaring that Kriol is not only "common" but "easy" and "nice" and the prime medium with which "people get to know each other". She even argues that it should be used in education: "why don't they try and enforce it?"

The position that Kriol is a 'real' language and that it should be used in school has been strongly supported by the *National Kriol Council* and is found often in interview quotes. There is a sometimes surprising awareness of language

discourses as they exist in sociolinguistic research, where it is argued that Kriol is not a dialect but a language and that it therefore should be made official. It is likely that this awareness at least in part stems from the activities of the Council, whose leading figure Sylvaana Udz, is a well-known public figure (on the overt prestige of Kriol, see also Ravindranath 2009: 127). The conceptualisation of Kriol as 'a language' is also found in the following quote with a local dive teacher who strongly identifies as Creole due to his Belize City upbringing (his first and his family name are both Hispanic, which is evidently not relevant for socio-cultural categorisation):

(2) Transcription

01 Person 1: It is, it is a regular language. Yeah.
 02 Interviewer: But do you mean [one should] also use it in school for
 03 example?
 04 Person 1: I would definitely support it
 05 cause that's (.)
 06 you can't give up our mother tongue
 07 that's our native language.
 08 Kriol is a language and you just don't want to lose it. [...]
 09 so Kriol should be your first language you learn at home.
 10 then you have English, then you have Spanish.
 11 so everybody here should speak three different languages

Kriol is here explicitly defined as "regular language" – a position that is in contrast to other commonly-held, more traditional views that have defined Kriol to be 'broken English' that has 'no grammar', which I still found among the older, but also among some informants of the younger population. The argument becomes stronger in the next lines (6 and 7) where the informant uses the essentialist terms "mother tongue" and "native language" to describe Kriol. The use of the possessive pronoun "our" in "our mother tongue", "our native language" is crucial and clearly it is a Belizean community that is here constructed linguistically. This is all the more interesting as in line 8, the fear of losing the language is expressed, which contradicts the previous claim that Kriol is "our native language" – the term *mother tongue* is not used to refer to actual language use but is a symbolic term to denote 'the language of Belize'. This is also clear from the following line where the interviewee expresses the normative attitudes that Kriol should be (ergo: is not) the "first language you learn at home". English and Spanish apparently should be languages that are used besides Kriol; they are, however, here not linked to the family domain. Another crucial observation is the construction parallelism: "Everybody here should speak three languages". The respondent indirectly defines Kriol as being of equal status and in parallel to English and Spanish, which both are used in different and more formal domains and both have a much higher overt prestige as standardised, powerful world languages. Despite the strong positive attitudes towards Kriol that are displayed in the above quotes, it should be noted that the discursive construction that English and Spanish are 'real' languages but Kriol is not, remains common in Belize. Transnational and post-colonial value scales

(in which US and UK varieties – spoken by the absolute majority of tourists – have the highest rank) influence the local situation and partly explain the symbolic functions of Kriol as expressing authentic village belonging. Transcription 2 displays the informant's desire to make Kriol the national language of Belize, which serves to symbolically create an autonomous social space that is neither English (the former colonisers' and the tourists' language) nor Spanish (the dominant language of all of Belize's neighbours). Note that such a position is by no means similar all across Belize (compare, for example Ravindranath 2009: 137, who documents strong rejections of Kriol in Garifuna villages of Belize) and it may be assumed that the frequent and almost overwhelming contact with tourists here supports the function of Kriol as an important local in-group marker, reminding of Labov's seminal study on Martha's Vineyard, where, similarly, linguistic features index local authenticity and are used as symbolical boundary markers to exclude those who do not permanently live on the island (see Labov 1963)¹.

Despite this locally common perception of Kriol as 'a language' and the obvious important social role Kriol has, it can be difficult to distinguish Kriol and English in structural terms. This applies not only to the outsider of the community – I had difficulties differentiating between what people defined as Kriol and as English, even in formal realms like teaching. Due to processes of decreolisation, the increased use of Kriol also in electronic written communication and the use of local forms of English also in broadcasting, local Belizeans do not necessarily regard Kriol forms to be not English.

There is an overall confusion with respect to certain features of whether they are Kriol or English and whether or not they belong to a formal domain. The following quote from an interview with a male university professor who is a native islander illustrates a widespread insecurity when it comes to defining what is English and what is Kriol:

(3) Transcription

01 they [teachers] think that the children speak and understand English.
 02 and I tell you the reason they think like this because (.)
 03 as a younger teacher (.) I used to have the same impression.
 04 you know. Being an untrained, young teacher I thought that,
 05 I thought, well we can all understand and speak English
 06 because I hear you all out there.
 07 but it's not English they're speaking.
 08 it's Kriol they're speaking.

It is likely that the informant here constructs 'English' to be an exogamous standard variety of English, including its phonetic realisations. It seems that in informal forms of everyday language practice, many speakers in Belize have developed a kind of fused lect (Auer 1999) where grammatical differences between the codes do not necessarily have a boundary marking function and

¹ Thanks to Alexandre Duchêne for pointing this out.

where, therefore, it has become difficult to differentiate codes. Indeed, using data from linguistic landscape imagery, which I collected randomly, it can be maintained that what would elsewhere be regarded as non-standard forms (e.g. lack of subject-verb agreement) is appropriate, for example, in public governmental signage or in school signposts, while most of the lexical forms that are defined as Kriol in explicit language ideological discourse are in fact the same as in English, sometimes (but not always) with a slightly different pronunciation. Sound features like pitch, intonation and speed rhythm seem to be crucial factors in distinguishing English and Kriol.

Examples from speech data (interviews and recordings of conversation) show the difficulty of differentiating Kriol and English on structural grounds. In the qualitative interviews that I conducted with villagers, we can assume that interviewees produce their most formal variety of English. Informants differ with regards to the realisations of copula and the patterns of subject-verb-agreement. Zero copula forms, for example (which have been described as a defining feature of Kriol, see Decker 2013: 19), appear frequently but with different quantities in different speakers. What has been defined as 'Kriol' grammatical forms is thus part of formal uses of English in Belize. At the same time, what has been defined as 'English' is part of language practices that we may treat as 'Kriol', if we assume to Kriol to be the local in-group language. Consider the following example from a recording of two pupils in peer-to-peer class interaction, talking about a class task:

(4) Transcription

01 Speaker A: must be two papers [pyapas]²

02 Speaker B: Well I [a] never know [no] I [a] mi forgot to.

On grounds of the social situation, it is not easy to decide whether we here have to do with 'English' or with 'Kriol'. English is the official classroom language whereas Kriol is the language that is seen as an index of local belonging, used among peers. The situation of informal classroom language encompasses both social spheres. On grounds of sentence structure and pronunciation, it is similarly difficult to say whether this is Kriol or English. The lexical items are clearly English but the pronunciation of *papers* with a vowel on-glide [pyapas] and the monophthongisation of the 1st person pronoun as [a] and in the verb *know* [no] represent Kriol sound realisations. The particle *mi* is a Kriol pre-verbal past tense marker – it is here used in combination with the (English) inflected form of the verb *forget*, whereas Kriol realisations would have a non-inflected verb forms at this position instead. Thus, in practice, as can be shown in this example, lexical and grammatical features of English and Kriol are used in combination.

Yet, the fact that the degree of lexical or grammatical difference is not central in

² Symbols in square brackets represent phonetic symbols.

boundary marking by no means indicates that the boundary is socially irrelevant. This can be inferred from the fact that the ability to code-switch between English and Kriol is constructed by various interviewees as an index for class as in this quote from an interview with a middle-aged female teacher whose main language is Kriol (Spanish, Arab, and English were her first languages):

(5) Transcription

01 that we have in common.
 02 it's our (.) middleground, it's our common ground.
 03 ahm (1,5) but it's almost like, you know [...]
 04 because it's sort of our common ground (2)
 05 but we're supposed to be able, and,
 06 we're supposed to be able to codeswitch,
 07 we're supposed to be able to, you know
 08 and (2) to the extend that we can do that (.)
 09 then becomes a reflection of (3) your class,
 10 yóur, haha, the level, you know, where you are at,
 11 how you're perceived and that sort of thing.

The respondent constructs Kriol, in line with quotes above, as the "common ground" among Belizeans. The possessive pronoun "our" is used three times to refer to Kriol, thus constructing the language to be a "we"-code. It is intriguing that she says "but we're supposed to be able to codeswitch". Again, she constructs a national, Belizean "we" with the personal pronoun. It is unclear from where the demand stems but this "we" is supposed to be able to distinguish the codes. This first of all means that not everyone is able to do this – confirming that what people refer to as Kriol *and* as English in everyday practice is more a kind of fused lect. Some have argued that there is an emergent 'Belizean English' (see e.g. Blench 2013) and yet, this is highly contested among Belizeans and perceived as discrediting by most of my informants – the status of exogamous 'proper' English is high and most of my informants perceived the suggestion that there is an endogamous variety as almost offensive. In the above quote, the ability to mark the boundary between English and Kriol is described as an index for educational attainment and therefore for class, as it apparently requires formal training to learn to differentiate the two. This discursive construction of code-switching indexing class and education also occurs in other interviews.

In the following final discussion, I will sum up the main points on the role of social and linguistic differentiation and discuss what we can draw from this regarding the relationship between social and linguistic categories in more general terms.

4. Fuzzy Linguistic and Social Boundaries but Socially Salient Boundary Marking

Summarising, we can maintain that, while it is difficult to differentiate English and Kriol on structural grounds, people regard the boundary between Kriol and

English to be socially salient. There is a language ideological discourse that constructs Kriol as 'the *language* of Belize' that is central in indexing Belizean identity. The discourse mirrors traditional European modernist discourses on the relationship between a language and a nation. At the same time, at least in the local environment where this study was conducted, English and Kriol are partly fused categories and they are not always distinguishable. Nevertheless, the ability to distinguish one code from another is seen as an indicator for education and therefore class. This implies that the binary linguistic differentiation of *English vs Kriol* has a social value. Yet, the binary does not necessarily emerge from the actual everyday practice where both social and linguistic categories are partly diffuse (on the notion of *diffuse* categories, see Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985). The process of merging codes can probably be attributed to the continuing high prestige of English, its use in written form and the locally frequent interactions with internationally more hegemonic Englishes due to the tourism industry. And, paradoxically, while this contact with globally more prestigious forms of English is most likely one aspect in decreolisation and the fusion of Kriol and English, it is also a central aspect in the maintenance of a sociolinguistic boundary. Access to Kriol is crucial in marking 'authentic' Belizean identity; it is imbued with positive prestige.

A central observation in this is that, while the linguistic boundary between English and Kriol in Belize seems to be a continuum, to an extent that categories are partly fused, speakers nevertheless feel the category Kriol to be socially salient and also construct a binary opposition of both. The switch from English to Kriol is not felt to signal a scalar difference but indeed as a switch. This can be inferred from the descriptions of code-switching as a salient marker for class. In the long run, such language ideological discourse may impact on language practices (on the links of language ideology and language structure, see Silverstein 1979). Thus, even where linguistic categories are not easy to grasp, and where non-standardised, non-written language comes into play, speakers seem to construct linguistic categories if they are socially salient. It seems that it is not lexicon or syntax but sound features like speed rhythm, pitch and intonation patterns that mark the boundary of Kriol and English.

To discuss this in general terms, we may argue that where – as in the case introduced above – social categories are diffuse, language boundaries may also be diffuse. This does not mean, however, that language use becomes socially arbitrary. According to local cultural conditions and power differentials, language use, besides its referential meanings, continues to transport indexical social meanings. In the case of Belize, where ethnic categorisations are fuzzy and not necessarily expressed via language use this seems to predominantly focus on marking class boundaries. We can thus maintain that the social field and language practices are in a dialectal relationship. Language boundaries emerge from the social field (see also Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985) and are

intrinsically related to the existence of social categories. This supports constructivist approaches to language that argue that *languages* are discursive 'inventions' (Makoni & Pennycook 2005). Returning to the question posed at the beginning of the article on what happens to the link of language and ethnicity under conditions of globalisation, it will be crucial to question what the emergence of transnational, ethnically mixed social fields means for language change and linguistic boundaries in times of increased cross-national interaction.

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