Theoretical underpinnings for the study of material culture of multilingualism

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As sociolinguistic research expands into various provinces of human interest, such as globalization, multilingual identity, commodification of language, it is timely to embark on a scientific exploration and analysis of the least researched, often overlooked, but indispensable part of sociolinguistic reality: its material culture.

Language practices in both public and private spheres evolve in time and space where material objects abound, and carry out innumerable societal functions. The material culture of a multilingual society is a specific blend of materialities, originating in many cultures which constitute a multilingual society. The materialities, that include caps and shirts, domestic utensils, souvenirs, furniture, and spaces are visible and tangible, and therefore have extraordinary potential as research tool.

The study of the material culture of multilingualism can draw on solid theoretical findings proven over time in a number of fields of knowledge, in the first place, sociology, ethnography, linguistics and semiotics.

The paper will provide the theoretical foundations of the material culture of multilingualism developed so far; describe the concept of “language-defined object” emphasizing the meaningful wholeness of its material and verbal components; and discuss the features of material culture that are instrumental for studying contemporary sociolinguistic arrangements.


Johnstone, Barbara Pittsburghese shirts: Commodification and the enregisterment of an urban dialect, American Speech (2009)

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