From category essentialism to process dynamism. Reconsidering theory in contact linguistics

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1. Introduction

In this paper I ask whether there is a need for a dedicated theoretical framework of language contact. The question is linked to theorising in linguistics more generally. It also connects to the need to re-assess some fundamental epistemological principles that have been guiding categorisations of social identities and social reality. I consider 'theory' not necessarily as a closed set of formal rules and notations that aspires to capture and categorise every aspect of the relevant reality (in linguistics: linguistic structures, the organisation of communicative events, and the social configuration of language use) and to predict the relations between them. Instead, I understand 'theory' as the activity of 'theorising', taking a principled view of the world that regards occurrences as non-random but driven by needs and purposes. Following Rehbein (2024) I understand 'purpose' as a motivation to change constellations that is based on complex cooperation, is anchored in various communicative dimensions, and is implemented through plans and routines. Uncovering the dynamic relation between occurrences and purposes offers opportunities towards explaining action, especially collaborative action and its outcomes. Theory, or the activity of theorising, is thus the quest for an explanatory model of language use and language structures.

As a point of departure, I embrace the view that in a world of mobility and technology, multi-dimensional modes of communication and social organisation prompt and enable notions of identity and belonging to evolve in a manner that is more dynamic than ever before. Multilingualism captures that dynamism more strongly than perhaps any other aspect of language use; in fact, it always has.

Early accounts of language contact were trapped in the straitjacket of structuralist linguistics – explaining contact-induced change as a transfer or interference between two or more closed language systems. The twenty first century has seen the emergence of a post-structuralist understanding of language. Inspired by observations on multilingual repertoires, it substitutes system by practice. This is nicely symbolised by the popularity in recent discussions of 'translanguaging'. The concepts captures the idea of a relaxation of ideological rules on language separation and well-formedness. In Matras (2024: 81), I reported on a secondary school teacher's spontaneous deployment of bilingual resources during an Urdu class: *I will go around aapke marking karne* 'I will go around to do your marking'; *main bolungaa, you listen carefully* 'I will speak, you listen carefully'; *any word you can't read, usko [it] underline karo [do] and then ask me.* Translanguaging stands primarily for a pedagogical approach that rejects strict language purism (García and Li Wei 2014, Blackledge and Creese 2010). But it also represents interest in multimodality as part of a

linguistic analysis (Li Wei 2018). Moreover, it represents an ideological stance that is "equipped to critique forces of discrimination" (Creese and Blackledge 2018: xxiii). Heltai and Tarsoly's (2023) discussion of Romani in a Hungarian school offers an exemplary analysis of how acknowledging multilingual repertoires in an education setting can support equal opportunities and agency at the wider community level. Multilingualism is thus prompting scholars to think outside the box when analysing linguistic structure and language change. That in turn instigates critical engagement with social inequality.

I propose to adopt a critical epistemology that seeks to do justice to a complex and fluid reality by reducing our analytical dependency on fixed categories and re-directing the focus onto dynamic processes. Rather than essentialise phenomena, items, or individuals as belonging unequivocally to one category or another, I propose to re-direct our investigative attention to *processes* as giving rise to a spread of features that can assemble and re-assemble in a variety of combinations. Here's an example: The category 'native speaker' is well-established both in linguistic research and in popular perception and even in certain legal proceedings. Formal linguistics has long relied on so-called native speaker judgements to ascertain the grammaticality of linguistic constructions. Native speaker responses have been used to test the plausibility of structures, as an alternative to seeking empirical proof from actual communicative interaction. Such a procedure implies a stable, predictable link between several different factors: the acquisition of a language from birth ('native'), its supposedly exclusive use in the home environment at an early age, and a stable degree of proficiency. The latter is said to enable the intuitive ability to detect which structures are likely to appear in everyday speech and which are not. But as Wiese et al. (2022) point out, this understanding of 'native' conflicts with the emerging pool of observations on heritage language. Heritage language is the now a widespread term denoting the use of a home language from birth that is overshadowed during a speaker's lifespan by the increasing importance of a second, dominant language outside the home, coupled with limited exposure to more formal registers of the home language. Users in such settings have been referred to as "interrupted native speakers" (Montrul 2022). Critiquing the notion of native speakers can have a range of institutional implications: Language courses market themselves as able to train learners to speak "like a native". Job adverts often seek applicants who are "native speakers". Private agencies contracted by governments to determine the country of origin of asylum applicants based on language assessment claim to rely on native speakers who are, however, seldom trained in linguistic-dialectological analysis and have often been settled for many years outside the relevant region (cf. Matras 2024: 125ff.; Matras 2025).

The crux is the intrinsic inter-linking of features which in reality present neither a fixed cluster nor even a linear continuum on which the presence of one feature necessarily implies another. Instead, the sequence of acquisition of a language, proficiency, intensity of exposure, awareness of register variation and a feeling of ownership (crucial to revitalisation efforts) are all potentially independent of one another. They can combine in a variety of ways across individuals and even re-combine across an individual's lifespan. We might therefore discard 'native speaker' as a fixed category with a pre-defined set of correlates and instead approach it as a process: Early-age acquisition of a language may or may not give rise to or combine with other features. Home language acquisition cannot automatically be taken as a proxy for proficiency, grammaticality judgement, ability to identify other speakers, and so on. Each must be evaluated independently. Potentially, of course, such skills and abilities can also be acquired through intense exposure to a language even if that exposure does not begin at birth, that is, even if it is not 'native'.

My aim is to demonstrate how we can benefit from a critical stance on categories, re-focusing the discussion onto processes and feature spread in relation to a number of key areas of contact-induced language change: Borrowing, heavy borrowing, mixed languages,

pidgins and creoles, as well as the notions of home language, autochthonous and indigenous language, heritage language, diaspora language and lingua franca. I begin by setting out which dimensions of language a theory must, in my opinion, be able to address in order to offer an explanatory and predictive account of contact-induced language change. I review some aspects on which theorising in contact linguistics has tended to focus so far. I connect to current theorising on globalisation and to diaspora studies as a model of analytical framing that is based on participation and practice, before applying some of those same principles to the structural and sociolinguistic categories named above.

2. What's in a theory?

Discussing the emergence of verb-final word order in Cappadocian Greek under the influence of Turkish, Sitaridou (2022) argues that a specialised theory of language contact is redundant. In her opinion, Generative Grammar is equipped to describe all language phenomena. Explaining contact merely requires us to accommodate it within the theory's principles. In Generative Grammar, boundaries between language systems are taken for granted, language is equated with syntax, and syntax is seen as a modular configuration, isolated from communicative intentions. Sitaridou describes contact-induced change as a re-setting of syntactic parameters as children acquire grammar in a setting where there are multiple sources of input (described as "input driven by sociolinguistics"; p. 42).

As I indicated in my opening remarks, I consider 'theorising' as the quest to understand processes and make generalisations about motivations and the complexity with which language is used to change constellations. Theorisng (rather than applying the rules and notations of a particular named 'Theory') is thus the search for an explanatory account of action that users of language take. My point of departure is thus fundamentally different from the view represented by Sitaridou (2022) not just because I do not share the agenda of accounting for language within the pre-set parameters of a single, particular notational framework that limits itself to the abstract idea of a well-formed sentence, but because I view theorising itself as a process of critical reflection on human action that is dynamic and ever-evolving, guided by a basic understanding of language as a communicative device.

I will use an example to address what considerations must be given in my view in order to identify, explain and possibly predict the kind of structural developments that are particular to multilingual settings: Stalls that sell Döner Kebab are an omnipresent feature of the German high street. They have enriched Germany's culinary culture in the aftermath of the immigration of Turkish labourers. Most operate as small family businesses by persons of Turkish heritage. In some larger cities, franchises employ vendors of a variety of backgrounds who have embraced the terminology and service particulars of the industry. To those belongs the ubiquitous question *mit scharf, ohne scharf?* literally 'with spicy, without spicy', which vendors use to enquire about customers' preferences for sauces (in some outlets this has now been superseded by an open question asking to specify the desired sauces from a selection that is on display).

The construction violates the canonical rules of German grammar by assigning prepositions to the adjective *scharf* 'spicy'. Ostensibly, the model is Turkish, where a counterpart construction *acılı mı acısız mı?* 'spicy, without spice?' displays formal symmetry between the first part, where the lexical component *acı* is accompanied by an attributive suffix, and the second, where it is assigned a privative suffix (each side also contains a question particle). The new construction is, however, hardly treated as 'foreigner talk'. It is embraced, expected, and actively articulated by customers of all backgrounds including speakers of German as home language. It has become an integral part of the German language, albeit restricted to a specific transaction, and a specific illocution, as part of the routine that is particular to the institution of the Turkish Döner Kebab outlet. It is a

structural innovation in the German language that is intrinsically bound to the enrichment of action routines in a particular multilingual space. At the same time, it builds on the availability of pre-existing constructions used in parallel transactions in other, indigenous or long established, monolingual action constellations: The phrase *mit Senf, ohne Senf?* 'with or without mustard?' might be heard from a sausage vendor, while *mit Zwiebel, ohne Zwiebel?* 'with or without onions?' can be expected in a range of food-related transactions. In both examples the presence of prepositions is well in line with canonical German grammar since the items to which they are assigned are nouns.

The fact that the adjective *scharf* 'spicy' is assigned nominal properties in the Döner Kebab transaction is thus due to a combination of factors: The need for a new formula for a specific illocution in a new transaction, which in turn is embedded into an action routine in a new institution that constitutes a multilingual space; the Turkish model with its word class ambiguity around the lexical item *acı*; and the association with pre-existing constructions in similar transactions in German. The classic model of language contact where a dominant language impacts a minoritised one or where a home language impacts a generation's acquisition of the majority language is not applicable here. Instead, the minoritised language of multilingual immigrants impacts the dominant majority language and its monolingual norms. That is attributable to the introduction of a new action routine by people of Turkish heritage, one that is embraced by those of German and other backgrounds. The process is not a simple transfer of a single parameter from one system into another. Instead, it relies on the symbiotic and creative processing of linguistic resources that users have at their disposal in their integrated multilingual repertoire. The innovative construction owes its dissemination beyond users of Turkish background to others' participation in the new action routine, introduced in a transaction-oriented multilingual space.

A theory that is able to capture this change must be equipped to deal with institutional communication and the emergence of new action routines. It must address the motivation to express a particular illocution in a new transaction. It must be able to identify how users exploit structural resources from both languages, mapping features of the Turkish model onto existing German templates. It must be able to address the factors that prompt an integrated processing of the repertoire of linguistic resources as a whole, blurring or even removing perceived demarcation boundaries between sets of structural features. That, in essence, is the challenge facing contact linguistics.

As an interim summary, I reiterate that my interest is in contributing to theorising language contact by reflecting on users' motivations to adopt new structures and linguistic routines in multilingual settings. These motivations are necessarily embedded into the action constellations through which actors come together and communicate. Assessing those dimensions of action – the setting, the purpose, and the structural resources that users have at their disposal – can offer a pathway towards an explanatory account of contact-induced language change. It may also help predict the kind of patterns that are likely to emerge under similar circumstances.

3. Theorising language contact: A snapshot

Modern contact linguistics can be traced back to the works of Haugen (1950) and Weinreich (1953). Both considered contact-induced structural change as speakers' reproduction of linguistic patterns within the context of the language of a speech event that is distinct from the language in which those patterns were acquired. Borrowing was thus regarded as a process of innovative reproduction. Both authors proposed taxonomies based on structural characteristics, including "loan translations", "loan blends", "substitution", "negative transfer", "replica" and so on. Structure-based taxonomies remain a point of focus.

Johanson"s (2002) model of "code copying" distinguishes "global" copies involving all material aspects, "selective" copies where only some are copied (e.g. phonetic or semantic features) and "mixed" copies where elements from both languages are combined. In Matras (2009/2020) I distinguish between the replication of linguistic "matter" and "pattern" as procedures that allow the user to balance different pull-factors when managing the multilingual repertoire.[1]

For Thomason (2001), power relations between languages and the intensity of contact determine the direction of interference: transfer from a first or substrate language into the dominating superstrate language or vice versa. Mixed languages and pidgins and creoles are considered to be cases of "broken transmission" where languages emerge in a contact situation that were not passed on by a parent generation. That sets them apart from languages whose genetic classification is straightforward. Winford (2003) too regards language maintenance and language shift as the principal two socio-historical dimensions that give rise to language contact phenomena. Building on van Coetsem (2000), Winford (2003) distinguishes "borrowing" and "imposition" as two separate mechanisms: the former involves the adoption of material from a second language into the first, and the latter the transfer of features from a first to a second language. Thinking of the Döner Kebap example discussed above, one might regard this position as unnecessarily essentialising users' languages as fixed sets linked to predictable measures of proficiency and performance. An alternative is to approach a user's repertoire of linguistic resources in its entirety and view permeations of perceived language boundaries not as system interference but as changing routines. I return to this point below.

Whitney (1881) introduced the term "borrowing" to refer to the appropriation of structures from one language into another. Noting that word forms were borrowed more easily than grammar, Whitney postulated a scale to capture differences between the borrowability of individual word classes: noun > adjective > verb (where ">" indicates that a category is more easily borrowed). In due course, attention would be given to the typological parameters that may condition such scales, such as structural autonomy and semantic transparency, as a basis for implicational hierarchies of borrowing (Moravcsik 1978), and to challenges in establishing the empirical validity of borrowing scales (Campbell 1993, Matras 2007). For Thomason and Kaufman (1988), contact susceptibility is arranged on a scale from content words, through function words and so-called minor phonological, lexical-semantic and syntactic features, on to adpositions and derivational affixes, through to new phonemes, word order changes and inflectional borrowing and finally to what is called "major typological disruption". The scale is linked to the duration and intensity of contacts based on casual observations, though no attempt is made to explain what inner properties make some structural categories more prone to contact than others. Myers-Scotton and Jake (2000) argue that the sequence of the speech production process impacts speaker's flexibility to insert forms from one language into the sentential frame of another. "Early" system morphemes are those that inherently attach to content morphemes (such as definiteness) and are therefore more likely to accompany content word borrowings, contrasting with "late" system morphemes that are linked to the grammatical framework (like tense and case morphemes), while possessive morphemes assume an intermediate

[1] The distinction was first introduced in Matras & Sakel (2007a). In parallel it was also mentioned as a strictly terminological explication to the method employed in an edited collection (Matras & Sakel 2007b). Since, the abbreviations MAT vs PAT have been cited in isolation from the theoretical outlook that they represented. That, in my view, is quite telling of just how powerful the inertia is to embrace plain taxonomies even at the price of simplification. Readers seem to find the abbreviations attractive, and replicate them, while the more profound theoretical explication (outlined in detail in Matras 2009/2020) receives almost just secondary attention.

position. This understanding of contact is predicated on clearly demarcated language-system boundaries and a pre-defined hierarchical social relationship between them.

In Matras (1998) I first proposed a model of grammatical borrowing that was linked to users' control over elements of an integrated multilingual repertoire. In this understanding, some structures more easily escape control for language choice. Those include elements that partake in the monitoring and directing of hearer-sided processing of the interaction, such as conjunctions and discourse markers. The sensitivity of such 'utterance modifiers' to contact-induced change (that is, their historical replacement by corresponding items from the contact language) is revealed when examining implicational hierarchies of contact susceptibility in diachronic perspective. The features that determine the hierarchy can then be interpreted through a functional lens, guided by the pragmatics of multilingual discourse interaction. That includes bilingual speech production errors, or lapses in control. That empirical, comparative study (Matras 1998) showed that contrast is more prone to contact than disjunction, while disjunction is more prone to contact than addition. Later work suggested that modality is more contact-prone than aspect and tense; supra-segmental features are more susceptible than segmental phonology; and items that operate on a loose presupposition basis such as indefinite expressions ('anything' etc.) are more prone to contact than other pronominal forms like deixis and anaphora, which presuppose a shared mapping of information (see Matras 2007, 2009/2020). Contact susceptibility was interpreted as a correlate of control over the selection and inhibition of elements within an integrated multilingual repertoire. That cognitive dimension shifts the discussion beyond the parameters of gap or prestige which is foregrounded in more traditional accounts of borrowing.

Identifying the structural unit that is the subject of change is another challenge. Heine and Kuteva (2005) adopt a model of grammaticalisation where changes to the frequency, distribution and semantic meaning of inherited word forms and morphemes are modelled on an external structure. The notion of pattern-replication (PAT), discussed in detail in Matras (2009/2020), offers an explanatory model in the form of the "pivot matching" hypothesis. The process reconciles exploitation of the full expressive potential of the repertoire with accommodation to context-bound language choice. Users identify a feature that is pivotal to a task-specific construction in the model language, creating a new construction while drawing on material from the activated language. Unlike the grammaticalisation approach, the pivot-matching model applies the same principles to spontaneous innovations and to longer-term and established structural change. Ziegeler (2015) argues for the existence of a "convertible construction" that can be used for different purposes during the replication stage. This approach has the advantage of not requiring a shift of semantic meaning or syntactic distribution over time, allowing instead for the fact that users employ constructions for different meanings in different contexts, or situational variation. For example, the bare noun construction 'rental of wine glass also available' (Ziegeler 2015: 192) contains in effect two parallel constructions: the first is an indefinite mass noun 'wine glass', which conforms to Standard English. The second, colloquial construction carries the meaning of a non-specific noun 'a wine glass'. Both share the meaning of unboundedness. Contributions to Zenner, Backus and Winter-Froemel (2020) similarly describe contact in terms of speaker and hearer interaction and the use of repertoire, linking synchronic and diachronic dimensions while adopting a unified framework of matter and pattern replication. As the local unit of change they identify a mental categorisation "below the surface", implying converging processes of mental organisation.

The language ecology model (Mufwene 2001) rejects the view of broken transmission across generations. It regards languages as ensembles of individual idiolects, each drawing on a pool of features that are present in the multilingual environment. Creoles

stand out not through imperfect acquisition but through their evolution in a particularly diverse environment, which accounts for their combinations of structural features. The framework assumes that features that are frequent in the environment are more likely to be selected and replicated. Hybridism in language is seen as the default norm, not an exception (cf. Ansaldo 2009, Aboh 2015, Lim and Ansaldo 2016).

To summarise: We've touched in this very brief snapshot on a (selective) range of approaches to language contact, from the taxonomy-oriented venture to classify structural outcomes, to the search for some predictability in the sequence of structural categories likely to be affected by contact, to correlating that sequence with macro-level power relations among languages, with the inner cognitive function of categories and their role in managing discourse interaction, the types of process and unit that are subject to change and the motivation for change, and on to the dynamism of individual creativity in multilingual settings. In the following section I explain some of the transformations of so-called post-structuralist sociolinguistics and their anchoring in a critical social science with a focus on the fluidity of identities and category indicators.

4. From system to fluidity: The multilingual repertoire

We are in an era where identity categories are questioned: Ethnicity, gender, and citizenship are acknowledged as fluid and negotiable. Anderson's (1983) influential work on "imagined communities" opened a discussion that viewed nations as social constructions built around ideologies of shared cultural assets, especially standard languages. Diasporas have since been flagged as alternatives to constructivist notions of ethnic identity – what Hall (1990) referred to as "positioning" amongst a "creolisation of features" and what Brubaker (2004) labelled "ethnicity without groups". This approach regards community as a category of practice rather than a fixed collective entity that implies sameness. Appadurai's (1992) seminal work described as "ethnoscapes" the various socio-cultural networks that individuals can be part of irrespective of place of birth or current settlement.

The simultaneous partaking in multiple and multi-site communities of cultural practice requires a new understanding of mobility, one that overcomes what Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003) labelled "methodological nationalism" – the view of migration as a mere transposition of citizens from one nation to another. Brubaker (2005) described diaspora as a set of practices that take a "diasporic stance": Actively constructed rather than pre-existing by virtue of the displacement history of a fixed group and its members. Diasporas benefit from transnationalism and cosmopolitanism to form what Werbner (2002) called "communities of co-responsibility" that act beyond locations and maintain, as Cohen (2008) argued, a distinctive life within the host countries, particularly in cities. In the age of globalisation, cities have become what Vertovec (2007) called "super-diverse": Not just displaying cultural differences on a new scale but also offering individuals and communities multiple opportunities to associate in different ways and to forge a variety of institutions.

The fact that multiple connections can transcend physical space leads to a lower degree of predictability of the links between language, place, identity and community. This realisation of dynamic, permeable trans-local networking has methodological implications for the analysis of relations between linguistic forms, participants, place and institutions. In this context, researchers in sociolinguistics have turned their attention to the fluidity of language practices and language identities, questioning the ideological lens that gives rise to the notion of fixed language boundaries (Blommaert 2010). Crossing language boundaries is appreciated not just as a "bilingual mode" (Grosjean 1989) but also as an appropriation of features associated with others' speech varieties (Rampton 1995, Jørgensen 2008). That raises methodological questions as to whether being an integral part of a system

is an accurate way of describing linguistic forms. Alongside translanguaging, researchers speak of "metrolingualism" and of "disinventing" language (Makoni and Pennycook 2006, Pennycook and Otsuji 2015). Awareness of fluidity gained through observation of mixing as default in oral, face to face discourse (Meeuwis and Blommaert 1998) has since expanded to computer-mediated communication where language mixing is commonplace (Androutsopoulos 2007).

In Matras (2009/2020: 4) I proposed a framework to capture users' management of a complex repertoire of forms and features:

> "My principal assumption in this book is that bilingual (or multilingual) speakers have a complex repertoire of linguistic structures at their disposal. This repertoire is not organised in the form of 'languages' or 'language systems'; the latter is a meta-linguistic construct and a label which speakers learn to apply to their patterns of linguistic behaviour as part of a process of linguistic socialisation. Rather, elements of the repertoire (word-forms, phonological rules, constructions, and so on) gradually become associated, through a process of linguistic socialisation, with a range of social activities, including factors such as sets of interlocutors, topics, and institutional settings. Mature multilingual speakers face a constant challenge to maintain control over their complex repertoire of forms and structures and to select those forms that are context appropriate. Context-appropriate selection does not necessarily conform to a separation of 'languages': In some contexts, certain types of cross-linguistic 'mixing' and 'inserting' may be socially acceptable and may constitute effective goal-oriented communication".

That model described repertoire management as an interplay of several competing pull-factors: The wish to accommodate to setting and context by selecting anticipated and appropriate structures while inhibiting others; the motivation to exhaust the full expressive potential of the repertoire; and the drive towards reducing the processing load on the deployment of the selection and inhibition mechanism itself, leading to generalisations of structures across communicative settings. The balance among these factors is conditioned by the changing dynamics of social norms, but also by the cognitive load associated with individual categories. That allows us to derive an explanatory account for the hierarchical nature of contact-susceptibility around individual categories.

Other works too called to replace language as a pre-defined set of structures by a dynamic set of practices and groups as evolving networks of practice. Repertoires, it was argued, consist not just of linguistic structures and communicative routines but also of a range of lived experiences and encounters (Busch 2012, Blommaert and Backus 2013). Wiese (2023) proposed a model that seeks to reconcile fluidity of language practice with the existence of grammars and language ideologies: Communicative situations guide users to select features. The conventionalisation of those features in certain communicative situations creates grammars. These grammars can then be socially indexed to represent social identities, turning perceived boundaries into a reality in its own right in the social organisation of communication. Language ideologies, according to Wiese, exert pressure in different settings, allowing users to use language as "free range" in some settings where monolingual ideologies are suspended (or simply absent). Such settings include digital social media, communication among multi-ethnic adolescent peer groups, and more.

To summarise: The so-called critical turn in sociolinguistics more generally, and in the study of multilingualism in particular, is anchored in a changing epistemological environment in the social sciences and humanities in which boundaries are questioned. Instead, emphasis is placed on individual features and the permeability of configurations

through which those features can be combined, disentangled and re-assembled, often to adapt to local, temporary and contextual constraints and purposes.

5. Revisiting types of contact outcomes

We might regard what Wiese (2023) calls "free-range" as more than just a suspension of the language separation ideology. It is the creative assembly of new routines drawing on the resources of the repertoire, much like we saw above in the Döner Kebab example. Such creative assembly involves linking the dimensions of an individual's repertoire of structures with a broader knowledge base: the accumulated experience of language varieties in local action spaces – an action-oriented understanding of language ecology. That ecology includes not just structures and the status of languages but also the illocutionary and transactional dimensions of purpose-oriented communicative routines. The outcome of such processes of creative assembly is more than a statistical "role of the dice" (Aboh and Vigouroux 2021). It depends on the functional value of structures – their semantic-pragmatic role – in processing communicative action routines. The goals of communicative action, the illocution, the actor constellation and the internal function of categories all require an inter-linked theoretical anchoring if we are to understand the choices that users make when re-assembling structural features in response to new and emerging communicative routines.

In this section I revisit some of the frequently used categorisation concepts in contact linguistics and examine how they might be understood as processes that owe their emergence to new action constellations, communicative goals and illocutions, attitudinal predispositions and modes of cooperative knowledge processing through multilingual repertoires. I take this as a point of departure for a critical reflection on analytical categories, and to re-frame them as processes that give rise to a spread of associated features.

Let us begin with the most commonplace concept in contact linguistics: Borrowing. The metaphor suffers from shortcomings: The so-called transfer of a structure from one language to another does not foresee its return to a rightful owner. It does not even acknowledge previous ownership or source; these are abstract concepts articulated through the lens of a meta-level perspective. Johanson (2002) therefore proposed the term "copying" to capture the deployment of a structure from one system within another. My own term, "replication" (Matras 2009/2020), addresses the flexibility in adapting structures across sets of communicative interactions that are socially constructed as languages. The focus on etymology to identify borrowings has given rise to controversy in regard to the question whether there can be a synchronic distinction between borrowing and codeswitching, whether the two are inherently the same, or whether they might be understood as a continuum that takes into consideration not just structure but also usage and position within the repertoire (on the latter see Matras 2009/2020: 115-119).

If we accept that pull-factors shape management of the multilingual repertoire then we might approach borrowing as a process rather than an outcome: It is the relaxation of constraints on selection and inhibition of linguistic features in response to communicative settings such as interlocutor or action constellation. In Matras (1998) I discussed why the cognitive load around discourse markers prompts users to relax and sometimes to abandon altogether the need to select and inhibit relevant items by language during interaction in multilingual settings. The perpetuation of the process leading to borrowing is subject to constraints on language attitudes. However, it is not the prestige of a dominant language as such that drives the process. Crucial is the impact of unidirectional bilingualism. It means that items from the majority language are understood and accepted by all speakers. They are therefore functional during interaction in the minority language, but not vice versa.

That communicative asymmetry instigates, and allows us to predict, the direction in which selection and inhibition constraints are relaxed.

In the following two examples, Lovari Romani as spoken in Hamburg, Germany has adopted the discourse particles *also* and *nə* from German, and Hasidic Yiddish as spoken in New York has adopted *anyway* and *but* from English. Note that the focus particle *afile* 'even' is of Hebrew origin, adopted into spoken Yiddish through the role of the Hebrew as liturgical and scholarly language and its consequent impact on argumentative discourse:

(1) Lovari Romani, Hamburg

Laki	*familija*	*sas*	*also*	*kesave*	*sar*	*te*	*phenav,*	*artisturi,*	*nə?*
3SG.POSS	family	was	PART	such.PL	how	COMP	say.1SG	artist.PL	PART

'Her family were like such how shall I say, showpeople, right?'
(Matras 1988: 299)

(2) Hasidic Yiddish, New York

Ikh	*kim un*	*anyway,*	*afile*	*ikh*	*kim*	*shpet,*	*but*	*ikh*	*kim un*	*anyway.*
I	arrive.1SG		even	I	come.1SG	late		I	arrive.1SG	

'I am arriving anyway, even if I arrive late, but I am arriving anyway'
(Matras and Assouline 2025: 18)

By contrast, lexical insertions, whether ad hoc or conventionalised, can be driven by a need to exhaust the full expressive potential of the multilingual repertoire in order to arrive at a description that is nuanced. Rather than expose a weakness in the recipient language, it points to users' confidence in their multilingual set of resources. In the following example from a seven-year-old trilingual (German, English, Hebrew) whose school language is English, the insertion *year one* from English into the German utterance serves to re-enact the setting that is being described:

(3) Trilingual child with school language English, age 7:6

Da	*war*	*ich*	*noch*	*in*	*year*	*one*
then	was.1SG	I	still	in		

'At the time I was still in year one'
(Matras 2009/2020: 36)

This leads us to define borrowing as a process of alternating speech action routines: Practices of selecting and inhibiting structural features are re-set, either for particular speech action constellations, as in the case of *year one*, or more generally and permanently, as in the case of discourse markers in Romani and Hasidic Yiddish. This creates the impression of a transfer or copying of forms from one language system into another. In fact, all forms are present in the integrated multilingual repertoire as a whole. The change that we perceive is an outcome of their re-distribution across interaction settings, interlocutors or contexts.[2]

Heavy borrowing suggests a phenomenon that is extended both qualitatively and quantitatively. At the qualitative level it assumes that certain structural categories are less likely to be borrowed. At the quantitative level it suggests that the distribution of borrowed

[2] This observation is well in line with Weinreich's (1953) assertion that the true locus of contact is the multilingual language user. In the post-structuralist turn, various authors have put forward the notion of a user's repertoire of linguistic features (cf. Jørgensen 2008, Matras 2009/2020, Busch 2012, Blommaert & Backus 2013). Mufwene's (2001) notion of a 'feature pool' is formulated at the community level, and while it assumes an assembly of individual idiolects, it does not dwell explicitly on the relations between the wider linguistic ecology and individuals' repertoires of linguistic resources.

material across tokens (e.g. number of lexical items in a word class) and types (e.g. conjunctions, derivational inflection markers, etc.) is otherwise constrained. Deviations therefore stand out as 'heavy'. I wish to introduce a new definition of heavy borrowing as a process. I used the term "fusion" (Matras 1998) to denote the non-separation of languages within the repertoire, wholesale, for a given functional category. In structural terms, that means that two (or potentially more) languages share an entire functional category, such as all conjunctions or all prepositions. We might define heavy borrowing as fusion across a number of different categories. As a process, it pertains to users' manner of managing their multilingual repertoire. Fusion suggests that users do not engage in selecting and inhibiting counterpart forms among parallel sets within their repertoire. The process is progressive. It can lead to non-separation of sets around a variety of categories, with no need to set a fixed quantitative or qualitative threshold as long as more than just one category is affected. The category differentiation lends an additional aspect to the quantitative assessment of lexicon by etymology and so a new understanding of heavy borrowing compared to studies that are based strictly on lexicon (e.g. Haspelmath and Tadmor 2009).

Consider the following examples from Jerusalem Domari, an Indic language that has been in contact with Palestinian Arabic for some 5-6 generations (all from the corpus discussed in Matras 2012): Example (4) shows fusion around modal expressions, which affects all modal expressions in the language except 'can'. Arabic modal expressions appear along with their inflection. Example (5) shows the adoption of Arabic comparative and superlative adjective forms. It includes not just their morphological template but also the word forms themselves. That leads in effect to bilingual suppletion where every inherited (pre-Arabic) adjective has an Arabic-derived comparative form – somewhat like English *two* and *second*. Example (6) shows borrowing of numerals and countable nouns in the plural. Domari borrows Arabic numerals from 'four' onwards. While inherited (Indic) nouns appear in the singular with lower numerals (lit. 'three house'), in Arabic lower numerals take the plural ('three house-s'). With Arabic-derived numerals, Domari speakers revert to the Arabic plural noun, leading in effect to bilingual suppletion of all nouns that are countable, that is, all nouns that can appear alongside a numeral:[3]

(4) Jerusalem Domari
ama *biddi* *džam* *kuryata*
I want.1SG go.1SG home.DAT
'I want to go home'

(5) Jerusalem Domari
kuryom *tillik,* *akbar* *min* *kuryor*
house.1SG big.PRED bigger from house.2SG
'My house is big, bigger than your house'

(6) Jerusalem Domari
taran *dis,* *arbaʕt* *iyyām*
three day four day.PL
'Three days, four days'

Heavy borrowing as a practice is thus the non-separation of particular feature sets for several entire categories across the bilingual repertoire, notwithstanding the

[3] Of course, many nouns are, already in their base form, borrowed from Arabic and will therefore show the same lexical form with or without numerals, and with any numerals, and are for that reason no suppletive in the way that the pairs Indic-derived noun with numerals up to 4 and Arabic-derived noun with numeral from 4 and above appear.

maintenance of language separation as such, i.e. users' ability to identify an interaction setting as generally requiring the selection of one set of forms over another.

Pidgin and creole languages, and mixed languages, are thought to arise out of situations of contact. It has been suggested that mixed languages serve to flag emerging hybrid identities and that this pre-determines a split between the sources of lexicon and grammar (Bakker 1997) or in some cases between verbal and nominal grammar. These generalisations have been challenged. Mixed languages have also been described as the adoption of features into a stable grammatical framework defined by just one of the source languages (Gillon and Rosen 2018), particularly in regard to predication and clause level grammar (Matras 2000, 2003). The outcome can be illustrated from Michif, a Cree-French admixture spoken in the Canadian Prairies. Here, the verb including its subject and object inflections are derived from Cree (Algonkian) while the nouns including their definite articles and the conjunction are French-derived:

(7) Michif

payshnamowin	*li*	*sel*	*pi*	*li*	*pwavre*
pass.to.me	DEF	salt	then	DEF	pepper

'Pass me the salt and pepper'
(www.learnmichif.com, accessed August 2019)

In Matras (2021) I proposed to approach mixed languages as arising out of a performative action routine, one that carries a particular illocutionary message by combining elements of the multilingual repertoire that do not usually co-occur together. The possible seeds of such a process can be observed in another example from the trilingual child. Here, the setting is the home of the Hebrew-speaking parent. There are no other participants or bystanders in the interaction. It is evening and the eight-year-old has been prompted to prepare for bed. As he enters the bathroom, he turns to the parent first in Hebrew, then switches to English but inserts key lexical items in German. The combination takes on a humorous, theatrical key, signalling a defiance of norms through the choice of English with the parent for the utterance frame and the regularity of German insertions, while also reinforcing the bond with the addressee by flagging co-ownership of a shared multilingual repertoire:

(8) Trilingual child, age 8:6

Aba!	*Where do I get a*	*Lappen*	*so I can*	*wisch*	*my*	*Gesicht?*
daddy		washcloth		wipe		face [G]
[H]		[G]		[G]		

'Daddy! Where do I get a washcloth so I can wipe my face?'
(Matras 2009/2020: 38)

I suggest that mixed languages are the outcome of processes that constitute a performative subversion of linguistic action routines in multilingual constellations. Their performativity, expressed through illocution and mode, reinforces bonding by flagging joint ownership of the multilingual repertoire. This has often been alluded to as identity flagging, though its precise nature and motivation have seldom been formulated with respect to action constellations. O'Shannessy (2021) offers a clue in her discussion of Light Walpiri, a family-based mixed variety in Australia that combines Walpiri lexicon and nominal grammar with (English-based) Kriol verbs and verb grammar. In (9), Kriol *pudimon* 'put (him) on' contains the transitive affix *im*, from English 'him', widely regarded as a calque on the transitive marker of South Pacific languages. The proclitic pronoun *yu* can be interpreted as part of the verb inflection template:

(9) Light Walpiri

yu-m	*pud-im-on*	*mayi*	*nyampu*	*ngaju-nyang*?
you-FUT	put-TR-LOC	Q	DET	1SG-POSS

'Did you put this one, mine, on?'
(O'Shannasey 2021: 85)

O'Shannasey (2021: 83) suggests that Light Walpiri emerged when parents inserted into Walpiri baby talk finite verb forms from Kriol along with pronouns. She alludes to "flagging identity" but does not elaborate how it should be achieved through this particular structural choice. But viewed as a performative subversion of routines in particular action constellations, we might consider that the finite verb as the anchor of the predication serves as a kind of citation that mimics the enunciation of an utterance in settings where Kriol is spoken. Replicating the Kriol predication structure in Walpiri might thus be said to re-enact an impression of Kriol-speaking settings within family interaction in Walpiri. Re-enactment of Kriol action constellations might have served as symbolic of aspirations for children's futures, or else as a simulation intended to train them to navigate multilingual settings. Thus, a certain action constellation (home communication with small children) adopts a mixed structure template for particular illocutionary purposes (teasing while also prompting accommodation). It is oriented towards confidence-building in respect of a wider action space, also understood as the language ecology. That, in turn, gives rise to a new action routine, which, once stabilised, is perceived in structural terms as a mixed language that incorporates an unusual combination of etymological components from an underlying bilingual repertoire.

Mixed languages are an excellent example of how a focus on process is advantageous compared to a preoccupation with fixed sets of structural indicators. The varieties acknowledged as mixed languages differ widely in respect of their structural profiles and their functional scope. Angloromani and Lekoudesch can be described as in-group vocabularies used to express the speaker's stance on a state of affairs and the action constellation itself. Angloromani, used by English Gypsies for in-group communication, involves the activation of a set of lexical items largely derived from Romani. These are a carry-over from the community's historical bilingual repertoire (Matras 2010). Typical users have around 300-400 distinctive lexical items at their disposal. Lekoudesch was originally the in-group vocabulary, derived from Ashkenazic Hebrew, used by Jewish cattle traders in pre-war southwestern Germany. After the war it was continued in the village of Rexingen as an internal code of a small group of elderly male friends. By choosing an item from the special vocabulary, users identify the utterance as a performance of shared predispositions in regard to a specified action constellation. The illocutionary effect often entails a prompt or warning. The so-called mixed language is thus a discourse device rather than a closed system used across all action constellations. The bonding effect that it has on speaker and listener stems from the activation of a particular pool of shared knowledge: Not just the words are shared intimately, but also their symbolism and the way it affects the cooperative processing of the action space. Here, the performative subversion of action routines can open up a secondary action space in which speaker and interlocutor separate themselves from the surrounding actor constellation:

(10) Angloromani
Right, I'll leave you to rokker with the muskra
'Right, I'll leave you to talk [Romani] with the policeman [Romani]'
(Matras 2010: 135)

(11) Lekoudesch

Lou	*dibra,*	*d'r*	*guj*	*schäfft!*
not	talk	the	man	sits

'Don't speak, the [German] man is-there [meaning: 'a stranger is listening']'
(Matras 2009/2020: 318)

I now turn to pidgins and creoles. Véronique (2021) notes similarities between creole formation and second language acquisition, particularly around the reduction of verb inflection. This leads him to conclude that the founder generation of creole users or their pidgin forerunners were second language learners. It has been argued that the adoption of a second language acquired abruptly leads to an interruption of the natural process of accumulation of complexities such as over-specification, structural elaboration (i.e. the number of rules), and irregularity. Creoles may develop new inflections, but they tend to be unbound and non-paradigmatic (McWhorter 2011, 2018). Supporters of this hypothesis maintain that creoles share a distinct cluster of structural features (cf. Bakker et al. 2013). Criticising that stance as "creole exceptionalism" DeGraff (2005) insinuates that it presents creoles as structurally deficient languages with limited expressive adequacy and that it stigmatises the languages and their speakers. That framing has given rise to tensions and ideologically-driven polarisation in the discussion. Other authors challenge the creole distinctiveness model on other grounds. Aboh (2016) attributes the discontinuation of European inflectional morphology to West African substrate languages. He proposes that creoles developed not as a replacement for their users' first languages but in addition to them, that their nativisation was gradual and not abrupt, and that it was driven by a cross-linguistic competition where features were generalised that tended to be congruent among the different languages, as predicted by the language ecology model (cf. Mufwene 2001, Ansaldo 2009).

Below I compare two examples. The first, from Tok Pisin, a Papua New Guinean creole, shows the discontinuation of English verb inflection, while on the other hand we find innovative tense inflection (*bin* for past tense), agreement (*i* for the third person), valency (*im* for transitive derivation) and a nominal classifier (*wanpla*), all grammaticalised from English etymological material. The second example is German spoken by a Turkish migrant worker, recorded in 1984 in southwest Germany. Here too, German word inflection is absent. We see Turkish verb-final word order (which is also a variant in some German clauses) as well as creative ad hoc lexical composition ('parking ticket' expressed as 'guilty park write'). Whereas the absence of European verb inflection in creoles is sometimes attributed to West African substrates, which lack such inflection, Turkish is a highly inflected language, yet in the German-Turkish contact variety German verb inflection is also discontinued:

(12) Tok Pisin

Post	*Courier*	*niuspepa*	*i*	*bin*	*raitim*	*wanpla*	*stori*
		newspaper	he	PAST	write.TR	CLASS	story

'The Post Courier newspaper wrote a story'
https://www.abc.net.au/news/tok-pisin, accessed 13.11.2009

(13) German as L2 of Turkish labour immigrant, 1984

immer	*so*	*schuldig*	*parken*	*schreiben,*	*Geld*	*sahlen.*
always	thus	guilty	park.INF	write.INF	money	pay.INF

'One always receives a parking ticket and needs to pay a fine'.
(Matras 2009/2020: 87)

As a process, both second language acquisition in the German-Turkish example and historical creolisation as represented by contemporary Tok Pisin might be regarded as recourse to a shared pool of core lexical vocabulary in order to facilitate communication among actors with asymmetrical (i.e. only partly overlapping) linguistic repertoires. It typically arises in action constellations that involve transactions. The system-oriented approach to creoles envisages a target variety that is not attained, giving rise to imperfect learning and simplification. By contrast, by foregrounding action constellations and cooperative knowledge processing we can regard creolisation as involving agency: Mapping the action constellation in order to identify and deploy shared resources, and engaging in their creative adjustment in order to enable communication in settings where action spaces otherwise tend to be compartmentalised or even exclusive.

As the range of relevant action constellations where creoles are used expands and diversifies, so does the shared knowledge space including its action routines and linguistic resources. That gives rise to an ecology – a knowledge space – from which a greater range of features can be selected and deployed to facilitate communication. In that way creative processes that are initially ad hoc and individualised, as in our example from the Turkish migrant worker, can intensify, expand and converge across users, as attitudinal predispositions favour greater cooperative knowledge processing, giving rise to a wider pool of shared resources. From a system perspective, we perceive this as structural conventionalisation and grammaticalisation. The initial pool of shared resources, consisting of a basic lexicon and some accompanying conventions such as word juxtaposition, remains at the core. In the setting of migrant workers in Germany, that core is over time replaced by a variety of German that is closer to that used in most institutional settings. As a process, pidginisation and creolisation thus give rise not to a single structural type but to a spread of different structural outcomes. They range from trade pidgins that are limited to a distinct set of action constellations, on to creoles that become the default variety across all action spaces, while the variety represented by the Turkish migrant worker may not persist beyond the lifetime of an individual user and maybe not even across a full lifespan as that person's repertoire aligns itself increasingly with that of monolingual interlocutors.

In this section, to summarise, I outlined the principal premise of this chapter, which argues for the merits of a critical approach to language contact categories. Rather than operate within firm boundaries that assign strict features to categories and thereby essentialise the object that we are trying to describe, I propose to focus on the processes involved. This approach is concerned with motivations, purpose, and means rather than outcome. It de-essentialises, in the spirit of current epistemologies, and strives to do justice to the array of outcomes and the flexibility of assemblages. Above all, the focus on process rather than category outcome shifts theorising towards an explanatory account rather than concentrate on mere taxonomy.

6. De-essentialising practice-based categories

I conclude by reviewing categories that are already defined based on the practice that they represent rather than by their structural profile, yet here too there is often a trend to idealise or essentialise types. As in the example of 'native speaker', I will examine the advantages of working with notions of more open processes that give rise to a spread of features in potentially fluid combinations.

I begin with the concept of 'lingua franca'. The term refers to languages used for interethnic communication where participants have diverse background languages. A lingua franca may or may not be a contact language. English is a lingua franca in numerous international transactions, and Russian is used in encounters among nations in Central

Asia and the Caucasus; but neither language is considered to owe prominent structural features to the fact that it is used for contemporary interethnic communication. That said, certain usages of English, such as the semantics of the word *actual* as frequently encountered in official European Commission correspondence in English to mean *current* (modelled on counterpart expressions like French *actuel* and German *aktuell*) might be considered to be manifestations of the lingua franca effect where users who are not home speakers of the language appropriate it, adopting a sense of ownership that empowers them to innovate without subjecting their usage to the control of a monolingual norm, and at times even defying that norm.

By contrast, Nigerian Pidgin English and English-based Kriol of northern Australia are products of cross-language interactions and are widely used among members of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Modern Hebrew is said to have undergone vernacularisation owing to its function as lingua franca among Jewish immigrants of various language backgrounds in Palestine in the early twentieth century (Nahir 1998).

From an action-based perspective, linguae francae, like pidgins, might be regarded as the deployment of linguistic resources in a particular goal-oriented action constellation where actors' linguistic repertoires are asymmetrical. The similarity in definitions is not coincidental: Pidgins are inherently linguae francae. But the definition needs to account also for those linguae francae that are not pidgins: In some historical settings, actors have recourse to shared institutional action constellations in which a common language is used that may play a role in scripted discourse including literacy. Shared institutional action routines where that language is present may include education and media. Linguae francae thus display a spread of features ranging from the wholesale adoption of a given language that figures prominently in a shared knowledge space, as in the case of English in European institutions, its modification as wider elements of that space are incorporated into inter-ethnic action routines, as in the case of Modern Hebrew, its emergence out of transaction routines in tightly-defined action constellations, as in the case of pidgins, or even the persistent asymmetrical use of linguistic resources in certain action routines, known as receptive multilingualism. Crucial is the process by which actors with asymmetrical repertoires cooperate by resorting to a pool of shared communicative resources for purpose-oriented communication in very particular action constellations; then develop a sense of ownership of those shared resources, an appropriation that allows them to continue to develop the share set irrespective of any guiding normative intervention oriented towards a monolingual norm or target. That can give rise to a variety of structural developments, from inter-paradigm analogy (very common in colloquial Modern Hebrew), through to subtle lexical semantic shifts (as in the English example of *actual* above) and on to far-reaching substrate and grammaticalisation effects, witnessed in creoles.

I now move to another set of concepts. A 'home language' can be defined as the practice of using a particular language in the home. The concept becomes relevant when the home language differs from the one used in external institutional settings. It often denotes some kind of anticipated deprivation arising from the gap between the language of domestic interaction and that of institutional settings, particularly education. That risk might be mitigated by re-conceptualising the notion of home language to denote communicative practices in the home setting, binding it to a clearly-defined action constellation. Home language can, in this way, also indicate multiple sets within the repertoire, as it can cover any variety used in the home, by or with any other actors, in any kind of mode, in a range of different proficiencies.

The terms 'autochthonous' and 'indigenous' language are tightly linked, in different geographical and historical settings, to a notion of entitlement. We might define them as the practice of demanding status based on a claim to historical precedence in a given territory. Continuity in place is seen as entailing authenticity, which in turn is seen as

legitimising ownership. In public discourses, the emphasis on (numerical) minority and regional status seeks to justify legal frameworks that give such languages protection despite their secondary and sometimes even peripheral role in the institutional and public life of the nation states in which they are spoken. The ideological understanding is that status erosion and discontinuity as a result of pressure imposed by another population – the majority of the nation state in the case of autochthonous languages, a colonial power in the case of indigenous languages – should be reversed or mitigated. Lending institutional recognition to autochthonous or indigenous languages is not without contention. Critical studies of neoliberal ideologies have argued that pride in identity becomes an instrument of power and control of the state economy (Allan and McElhinny 2017, Heller and Duchêne 2012, Heller 2010).

'Heritage languages' tend to index a recent migration history. Heritage implies here a form of geographical displacement as well as a fixed notion of ancestry. Alternatively, heritage might be viewed as the practice of actively choosing inheritance (Deumert 2018) or as seeking a link to a community culture while at the same time evoking distance, for instance by signaling only partial proficiency (Kalayil 2019). Such an approach implies a history of disruption that is, however, accompanied by a feeling of belonging as well as permanent fluctuation. In this light, users' repertoires of cultural practices and skills are seen as broader and more fluid than fixed language systems with clear boundaries. Many researchers therefore speak of "heritage speaker" to capture the individuality of the process (Montrul 2010). In fact, users of regional autochthonous or indigenous languages may fall under the same definition: As semi-speakers and sometimes new speakers they too are heritage speakers in the above sense (cf. Arendt and Reershemius 2024). The shift away from fixed and essentialising categorisations can offer more intricate ways to address a complex reality.

The concept of 'diaspora language' often overlaps with that of heritage language in suggesting a sense of local belonging that is also accompanied by trans-local dispersion and awareness of a migration background. As a discussion framework, the term can address the wider implications of globalisation for linguistic diversity and linguistic identity (e.g. Tseng and Hinrichs 2021). As practice, it can defy language hierarchies based on precedence in a place while actively embracing pluralism and fluidity (Matras 2024: 101). Goldstein and Matras (2024) discuss how language as a diasporic stance can form a spread over various institutional action routines and actor constellations: Language can be essential in defining an action constellation, it can be meaningful to represent a stance within it, casual or incidental when it is not relied on to define relations among actors, or practical to facilitate communication without making a statement in regard to belonging or identity boundaries. Matras and Assouline (2025) narrow down a possible definition of diaspora language by pointing to the absence of an active connection to a perceived homeland, the absence of a monolingual baseline (a form of speech owned by a founder generation and aligned with that of the homeland), a tendency towards levelling within the community alongside individualised profiles of contact behaviour, and maintenance beyond two generations following migration. These are said to be linked to a tight-knit community structure and a tendency towards social segregation and strict maintenance of community-internal norms and institutions

7. Outlook

I regard a theory of contact as an explanatory account of the emergence and relaxation of boundaries among repertoire components and features. Contact is a practice and a form of social action. It requires a theory of social action: one that addresses action spaces and actor constellations, forms of knowledge that are shared among participants, the nature of

transactions, goal-oriented actions and the illocutions that accompany them, and the manner in which action routines enable cooperative processing of knowledge. Moving away from the notion of system boundaries does justice to the complex reality of multilingualism. It can also make an invaluable contribution to social justice: By interrogating category boundaries and shifting the focus to processes and feature spread, a theory of contact has the power to interrogate assumptions about language and social hierarchies, increase agency and analytical flexibility, and perhaps also break down barriers linked to essentialised notions of identity and belonging.

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