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Shapeshifters and shamans: Topologies of multilingualism

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Abstract

This paper is a radical break with a view of multilingualism as an arrangement or hierarchy of different languages which produces more or less visibility for these named varieties. Rather, it takes as its starting point a view of multilingualism as situated within a matrix of social relations, constituted in different times and spaces, between people carrying different histories, attitudes, and feelings. In an attempt to find new ways of representing these social rationalities, we argue for a topological view of multilingualism. This perspective draws attention to the ways in which the diverse facets of multilingualism interconnect and relate in different time-spaces. Our data draw on four artistic visualisations of multilingualism produced by students on a course which sought to explore new ways of re-imagining multilingualism. The posters and artefacts produced on this course stimulated our view of multilingualism as a networked, fluid and mobile typology, or as an *n-dimensional* form which shifts and changes as it rotates through time and space. We then link this conception to our discussion of Linguistic Citizenship as an *n-dimensional* topological phenomenon.

Introduction

Historically, as a feature of coloniality, multilingualism has to a large extent been about the erasure and hierarchisation of languages and speakers. Both historically and in contemporary times, it has comprised a technology for the bordering and governmentality of racialised bodies, determining what is taken to comprise a language, and how the relationships among languages and speakers are construed and their agencies regulated. From a different perspective, however, multilingualism holds the promise of engaging Others within complex and uncertain social relations. This 'promise' has been the focus of our research in recent years, in particular, the significance of 'affect' and 'vulnerability' in moving us towards a more 'spatialised' understanding of multilingualism as 'social relationalities' (Bock *et al.*, 2019). Together with a number of southern scholars, we have explored a view of multilingualism as situated within a matrix of relations, constituted in different times and spaces, between people carrying different histories, attitudes, fears, hopes and feelings; and as a continual negotiation of these relations in an ongoing quest to understand and better connect as fellow human beings, who can live together in a more socially just and sustainable world (Bock and Stroud, 2021; Heugh, 2017; Heugh, *et al*, 2019; Heugh, *et.al* 2021; Kerfoot and Hyltenstam, 2017; Lim *et al*, 2018).

The question, then, is what does it mean to see language as a *formative* dynamic in the manufacture of new relationalities – that is, language and multilingualism for social transformation? We have framed an approach to this question in the notion of Linguistic Citizenship (Stroud, 2001), which refers to the ways in which people use language(s) in anti-hegemonic and novel ways to afford themselves agency and voice otherwise denied. Linguistic Citizenship builds on the recognition that new socialities (a plurality of selves in communion) is a precondition for other and more ethical genres of the human (Wynter, 2003). Thus acts of Linguistic Citizenship are utopic and transformative, deploying language and other forms of semiosis so as to bring about change in the *status quo* for better and more ethical futures. In order to think of multilingualism in terms of Linguistic Citizenship, we need to reimagine multilingualism beyond the quotidian structured multiplicities of language-as-communication that, as noted above, continues to sediment historical divides and racial inequities. We

need instead to attend to the imaginative and world-creating dimensions of semiotically mediated encounters across difference, something that involves unlocking new registers with which to talk about and engage through language (Stroud, 2018).

This paper explores our experiences on a post-graduate module that we offered at the University of the Western Cape, called *Re-imagining Multilingualisms*. The overall aim of the module was precisely to re-think 'multilingualism' as socially transformative not through language policy but through the use of 'imagination' as a method of enquiry. Imagination as methodology is gaining increasing traction in qualitative research (such as ethnography, arts-based studies, performance studies and creative writing) as a way of both understanding social phenomena and exploring the potentials for changing social 'realities' (actualities) (Hayes, *et.al*, 2014). As such, imagination is well suited to leveraging insights into multilingualism in acts of Linguistic Citizenship.

The module

The module, *Re-imagining Multilingualisms*, sought to tap the historically lived experiences of students from two local universities, and the ways in which these students might imagine multilingualism as a modality of change. It took place over five weeks in April and May of 2018 and 2019, on alternating campuses, the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and Stellenbosch University (SU). These institutions have very different histories and contemporary identities. The first, UWC, was established in 1960 by the Apartheid state for people designated 'coloured'[1], as part of the grand scheme of 'separate education for separate races'. Since then, UWC has emerged as a leading 'historically disadvantaged' institution, both in terms of the number of black students that it graduates each year, and in terms of its research rankings. Students are generally bi- or multilingual and predominantly speak a combination of Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa, as well as mixed local varieties of these languages. The language of learning is English. Today, the institution is still largely home to students who would self-classify as 'coloured' or 'black,' although there is a small but growing number of 'white' students (about 6%).

SU, on the other hand, is a prestigious 'historically advantaged' university established over a century ago for people who identified as 'white' and 'Afrikaans speaking' under both the former colonial structures as well as the more recent Apartheid regime (1948-1994). It has a complicated history as the alma mater of many apartheid leaders, and has historically served a much more elite community than UWC. Since the transition to democracy in 1994, it has worked to change its historical profile and culture and to become more inclusive, but this process – as elsewhere – has been fraught. Although the student body is now racially much more diverse, the majority would still self-classify as 'white' and coming from privileged homes. The language of learning is both Afrikaans and English. Thus, the South African higher education landscape reflects more than a century of stratification based on racial and linguistic privilege, and all institutions have had to grapple with how to transform their historical identities and positions and become more inclusive in the face of rising pressures for socio-economic justice and student calls for decolonisation. Questions of language and multilingualism have increasingly come to prominence as vectors contributing to change.

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[1] Apartheid – literally, with the meaning, 'separateness' – is the name given to the system of institutionalised racial segregation entrenched under white minority rule in South Africa between the years 1948 and 1994. Under Apartheid, all South Africans were racially classified as 'coloured', 'black', 'white' or 'Indian'. It should be noted that in South Africa, the term 'coloured' has a different meaning to the way it is used in the United States and elsewhere. In South Africa, it refers to people of mixed heritage, many descendants of slaves from South East Asia brought here during the colonial times, or descendants of contact between the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa and colonial settlers who began arriving nearly 400 years ago. Despite their Apartheid and colonial histories, these racial labels continue to have considerable currency as markers of social identity in contemporary South Africa.

The module was designed as an Honours (first postgraduate year) module and included about twenty-five students from both campuses each year. The seminars were facilitated by a team of lecturers from both institutions, and consciously broke with the more traditional 'lecture style' of teaching by using a range of non-traditional pedagogies (e.g. multilingual, multimodal, arts-based and creative writing methods) to engage in a process of 'thinking through' language and multilingualism in new ways. The module included a final exhibition, at which a selection of the creative artefacts, poems and reflections were on display. Professor Lynn Mario Menezes de Souza (from the University of São Paulo), our visiting scholar at the time, opened the UWC exhibition in 2018 – and his 'opening words', plus a selection of what was on display, are presented in a Special Issue of *Multilingual Margins* which was produced by a student editorial team (see Menezes de Souza, in Abrahams *et al*., 2019). See also Oostendorp *et al.* (2021) for a reflection on the SU exhibition and the ways in which the boundaries between art, multilingualism and a stratified society merged in the installation and performance of the exhibition.

In 2019, we concluded the module with a two-day workshop, which included Lynn Mario as visiting scholar again. On the first day, we asked the students (in groups) to share their insights on multilingualism gained through the course, and to generate a list of words and concepts which reflected these learnings. We then asked them to consider how these words could cluster under the overarching themes, *People*, *Space* and *Affect*, and to consider how *Language*, *Other Semiotic Resources*, and *Multilingualism*, fit into this picture. We chose these terms to reflect key dimensions of semiotically mediated Self-making in place, where Selves are what emerge out of being-in-the-world in commonality with Others (Malpas, 1999; Stroud, Peck and Williams, 2019). These scholars ring-fence the importance of language in constructing *placed-ness*, and an understanding of what it means to be 'human' in terms of *topos*, a place formed through the interrelations of groups and individuals, and between the things and the environments mediated through language (i.e. philosophical topology, Malpas,1999) that create 'a sense of belonging'. This idea of Self, semiotically mediated and moulded into relational co-existence of belonging is at core a 'topological' interpretation of Linguistic Citizenship.

To set the students off on their journey of re-imagining, we presented them with a simple diagram (See Figure 1), as well as A1-sized sheets of white paper, and a collection of coloured felt tipped pens. The diagram is a simple space/field (region/domain), with the key words variously clustered in and around a triangle. In a broad sense, the triangle conveys a common, inherited, picture of language in the world. The fixity of the triangle keeps people, affect and space firmly and separately in place, and is underspecified with respect to more complex or shifting relationships between these elements. Language, as with multilingualism and other semiotic means are represented as forms of expression out-there-in- the-world, with language seen as something distinct from multilingualism, and where both language and multilingualism are differentiated from other forms of semiosis. As we noted above, language thus narrowly conceived has played a key role in bolstering coloniality, urging the philosopher Veronelli (2016) to argue for the need for alternative registers of expression in order to create new, postcolonial forms of relationality.
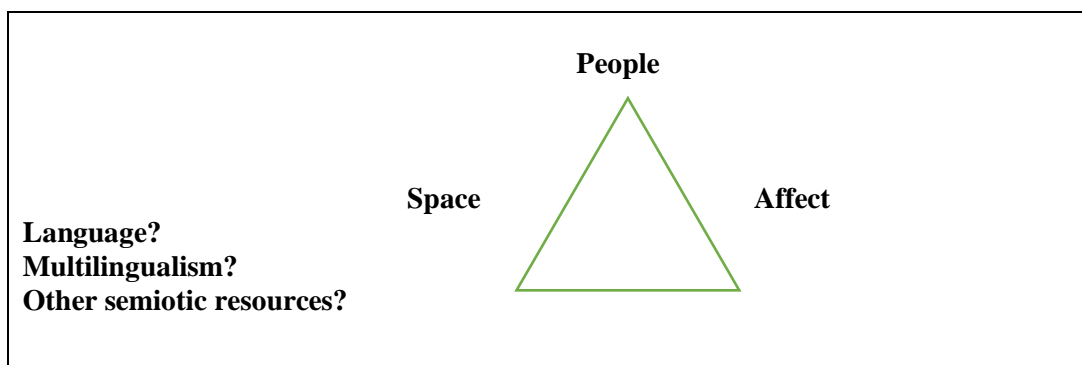

Figure 1: Workshop diagram

The students' task was to re-visualize – or re-arrange – these coordinates into new constellations and to explore how the points and elements (language, multilingualism, other semiotic resources) could be 'connected' so as to reimagine language and multilingualism as relationalities. Our approach uses a 'diagrammatic strategy' which is about visually conceptualizing an argument or theory to better grasp its implications, contradictions and points of tension (cf. Mullarkey, 2006; Brown, 2012). Our expectation was that the visual modality of the task would offer a register of figuring multilingualism, unencumbered by theoretical and policy discourses, and thus 'free up' the machinery of the imagination. And indeed, Group 1 in particular, began their write-up by recounting how the "Art sessions" in the module had made them "uncomfortable" because they felt they were "not artistic", but then they subsequently shared how, on completion of the group poster, they were "all surprised by the beauty and complexity of our creation, from nothing we created something."

What the students in all groups created were various topological permutations of the original visualization. Topology studies the properties of spaces and surfaces that remain invariant under distortion. This 'characteristic' is known as *homeomorphism* and is illustrated by the classic example of the coffee mug that is shaped from the hollowing out of one side of a 'doughnut' to make a hole that can hold coffee while preserving the common feature of the (doughnut) hole as the coffee mug handle (Wikipedia). Thus the one shape (doughnut) morphs into the next (coffee mug) without 'breaking' the shape in any way. In other words, topological equivalence, or consistency/continuity is only possible out of deformations that do not involve operations such as 'cutting' or 'glueing' (Gros, *et.al* 2019)

Phillips (2013) offers a comprehensive overview of the history of topologically oriented research in the social and cultural sciences where questions of structural continuity and change have been in focus. Lucy *et al*. (2012) have remarked on how society and culture itself has become increasingly topologically invariant, with inherent dynamicity, emergence and indeterminancy characterising contemporary social systems. In a seminal study, Mol and Law (1994, p.641) note how the *social* "does not exist as a single spatial type, but rather performs itself in a recursive and topologically heterogeneous manner". They distinguish four different social topologies: 'boundaried clusters' (regions); 'relational networks'; `fluid spatiality'; and 'fire' (Law and Mol, 2001). In what follows, we use these four topological types to characterize the visualizations produced by the student participants, before concluding with a discussion of how the process of visually reimagining multilingualism allows us to see Linguistic Citizenship as *n-dimensional* topological phenomenon.

3. Topological multilingualisms

In the following presentation of the four student groups' posters, our interpretations are informed by the descriptions that each group wrote about their posters, from which we quote in our descriptions of their work. We are not able to do justice to their many nuances and complexities, and will comment mainly on their overall design. However, we attend to some of the 'tensions' that emerge in the students' attempts to collocate the elements into one 'visualization', and suggest that the representational tensions find a more satisfactory solution in Group 4. Furthermore, we note in particular how the groups move from representations of *two-dimensional* (Group 1) to *three-dimensio*nal forms (Groups 2 and 3 with body shapes and hands respectively), and subsequently to an *n-dimensional* representation – a 'rotating mobile' (Group 4). We refer in particular to the forms of topological spatiality discussed by Law and Mol (2001) as *region*, *network*, *fluid* and *fire*.

Group 1: Region (Group members: Candice Olivier, Jenah McKenzie, Lulu Duke, Asanda Zani, Ashleigh Adams)

Figure 2: Group 1's poster

The poster by Group 1 members attempts to capture the *fluidity* and *interconnectedness* of multilingualism as it shifts and changes in different contexts (see Figure 2). They chose the shape of a *circle* to represent 'space' – its infinity and interconnectedness illustrated in their poster by the overlapping colourful circles. They filled these "with various images, words, letters and numbers to represent the diversity of language." Some circles were left blank "to allow viewers of our poster to fill in the blank spaces with their interpretation of reimagining multilingualism." At the centre of a poster is a prominent *green eye* – perhaps representing the viewer or 'Self' – and the spaces between the circles are filled with words such as "multilingual", "people" (playfully spelt 'peopleees'), "boundaries" and "multimodal" – written in colourful and decorative ways. Various other words

branch off these words in a rhizomatic design. The group argues that "the purpose of this was to show that all spaces are multilingual in some shape or form, through pictures, music, movement, time, etc." and that "language in a space is never static but determined by those who create the space." In their write up, they draw an explicit lesson as to how our perspective on things limits our understanding: when we focus too strongly on the "negative" or on the "boundaries", we are unable to recognise the value of what we do i.e. create something beautiful together. They reflected further on how this limited perspective can blind us to the "abilities and opportunities" within a space:

> We realized that sometimes we are so focused on the boundaries that we are unable to see the abilities and opportunities. We view spaces as monolingual believing that there is only space for one language regardless of who is and who is not able to speak the language. We view spaces in terms of our language understanding, the language we speak or a language we can understand. We view spaces in terms of our experience and not the experience of the space. We realised that if we shift our focus just a little we can see that spaces are multilingual and experienced and understood through multimodality".

They conclude that:

> reimagining multilingualism starts with us. We need to change the way we view language and our attitudes to language that is and is not our own. We need to understand that there are no boundaries in spaces where language is present. In the South African context we are always exposed to multilingualism and we need to become more aware and accepting not of the differences but of the ability of language to teach us and bring us together.

Multilingualism, then, is here represented as a shape that can be modified and changed but that nevertheless holds relationalities in place, as it were. The idea of multilingualism as a 'constant' space is conceptualized as boundaried. Boundaried clusters or regions are spaces where the component parts "are both kept separate and maintained in stable relations" (Moreira, 2004: 58). The picture of an orchestra comes to mind, with each segment playing in its region (the violins, the percussions), overseen by the conductor (the panoptic eye) and together contributing to a harmony of purpose and significance. No part of the stage is empty, and each has its own idiom that it juxtaposes with those of other members.

The eye functions almost panoptically as the point that oversees the multiplicity of elements in the space – the conductor of the orchestra. From a semiotic perspective, we are reminded of the notion of 'spatial repertoire' (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015) and recall Group 1's own lament in the words, "[w]e view spaces in terms of our experience and not the experience of the space".

Group 2: Network (Group members: Lauren Abrahams, Lucy Hopkins, Sima Mashazi, Tina Hlanjwa, Ammaarah Seboa)

Group 2's visualisation of multilingualism is embodied as a 'non-binary' person – a 2-dimensional representation of a 3-dimensional form (see Figure 3). They explain that they chose this image to emphasise the importance of 'the body' in multilingualism, as well as to draw attention to the need for us to break out of the 'boxes' which society typically imposes on language (separate, named languages) and gender (male, female). The non-binary nature of the body is indexed by the "pink heart print" fabric – typically associated with females – as well as the "bald head" and trousers – typically associated with males. Reference to the LGBTI community is signalled by the rainbow theme in the hat and the word, FREEDOM – a recognition of the dynamic nature of gender, which resonates with their sense of multilingualism as "*fluid and limitless, [and] capable of breaking through boundaries that have been normalized through society and colonialism* (our italics)." The person has a backpack (labelled "semiotic resources") and an open suitcase displaying the word,

"dynamic", as well as a number of arrows entering the backpack and leaving through the suitcase. The arrows contain attributes and concepts relating to multilingualism (such as "culture", "experience", "intuition", "language varieties", "identity", "expression", "fluidity", "limitless", "negotiation" and "dynamic") to show how these all influence and affect multilingualism (represented by the binary person). As with Group 1, some arrows have been left blank to give them "the freedom to add more concepts and attributes" as the context ("time and space") change. For this group then, multilingualism is embodied by a non-binary person, and intrinsically associated with the title of their piece, *Road to freedom*: "the freedom to choose and use one's linguistic varieties however and wherever one pleases". The latter statement, we would argue, is a definite nod towards the centrality of *agency*, a key feature of Linguistic Citizenship.

Figure 3: Group 2's poster

In Group 2's visualization, the hybrid non-binary body functions in a similar role to the 'green eye' in Group 1's poster. Rather than overseeing the 'regions', this 'centre' – like an old-fashioned switch board or 'centre of translation' – serves to 'administer' a so-called 'translation network' and 'link up' different voices. Elements, rather than being subordinated by a monoglossic design, gain their import/values from the relationship they have to each other. Relational networks are where the component parts of a social space (people and things) "acquire their roles from the relations they establish with other constituents and from the way some constituents circulate between nodes of relations" (Moreira, 2004, p. 60). A translation network links together unconnected domains so any one domain can be understood as representing another, in the way that 'figures' and 'diagrams' are used to 'stand for' people and things, and to represent their relationships to each other in a visual (networked) way (Moreira, 2004).

The significance of multilingualism is in how it is reliant on managing the complex arrangement of associations. The group's description of multilingualism resonates with the dynamic, heteroglossic, so-called 'multilingual turn' with its recognition of multiple forms of semiosis as 'output', and its family resemblance to notions such as *polylingualism metrolingualism*, *translingualism* (cf. Jaspers

and Madsen, 2019 for a critical overview of these terms). Once again, we note the centrality of *agency* and how multilingualism opens vistas to freedom by translating one set of resources to another. We note also the 'openness' of the design – boxes left open, in acknowledgement of the *incompleteness*, *potentiality* (cf. also Groups 3 and 4) and *unboundedness* (also present in 4).

Group 3: Fluid spaces (Group members: Lauren Van Niekerk, Jacina Januarie, Tasneem Plato, Kamilah Kalidheen & Leigh Motaleb)

Figure 4: Group 3's poster: The PSALMS

Group 3 created a complex image of layered words, shapes and forms: palms, stars, planets and the recycling 'logo', all centred around the central axis of the poster with the words, "limitless", "negotiations" and "fluidity" filling the three recycling 'arrows'. They recount how they began their session by brainstorming the six concepts given in the workshop task, and realising that they formed an acronym, PSALMS, a "hymn book in the Bible":

People
Space
Affect
Language
Multilingualism
Semiotic Resources

This led them to look at the palms of their hands and reflect on the act of praying, at which point, they recall how "Prof Lynn Mario enlightened us on the energies and polarities of each palm, in terms of giving and receiving. The right palm is the positive pole, that transmits and gives off energy and the left palm is the negative pole, which is receiving and taking of energy." It was this metaphor that offered them a new lens to re-imagine multilingualism: just as the cupping of hands in prayer symbolises the giving and receiving of (spiritual) energy and communion, so multilingualism is a continual *flow of giving and receiving* between people (recycling). They describe the process further as follows:

> The cupping of one's hands and palms is the **Space** we create when we communicate, which allows the opportunity for giving and receiving. Our fingers represent the **People** within that space, and the different shapes and sizes of said fingers is an indication of our uniqueness. The energies of our right and left hands are the **Affect** we experience when we transmit and receive the different energies from the people in our spaces. Additionally, the L shape, which our right index finger and thumb make, represents the **Language** which is the most common form of communication within a space and how **Multilingualism** was understood to be.

The representation explicitly acknowledges the plurality of unique Others, joined in a spatial structure of circulating affect that structures the interactions among them. The group then describe how the notion of 'flowing energy' brought them to the 'recycling logo' – which "symbolises the reimagining and reusing of something in a different way" – to represent the 'other Semiotic Resources' that are part of communication. Just as in the recycling process, we/people "are repurposing something that was once thought to be stagnant and rigid into something more fluid and complex", for example, when we communicate and recycle words to make new meanings. Here, they make explicit reference to *novelty* through the re-deployment of similar elements, as an effect of the circulation of affect in interaction. They conclude their write-up with the following summary, which draws attention to the *unlearning of boundaries*, the recognition of the *possibility* of the new and the novel, and the importance of *affect* as the relational process that binds us together:

> We have learnt that re-imagining multilingualism is a multimodal process, which requires us to unlearn the rigid learning process, and to take innovative steps to transpose the old with the new *by placing it in various landscapes, where its interpretative and negotiation abilities become visible for everyone to see and recognise that it cannot be categorised*. It has become an affective layer that leverages the intuitive to signify new relations, where *humanity/humility and empathy are at the forefront of listening to the dynamic changes that are taking place* (our emphasis).

For Group 3, then, multilingualism is depicted as that which organizes fluid spaces of relationalities (associations or links) into flows. This is also a form of 'stability' (or constancy) despite the flow of elements. In regions and networks, the elements in relationalities get their identity and significance from their position in the network or from the role they play in the concerted organization and synergies of different regions. In fluid spaces, the role/position/ identity of an element is defined through processes that produce roughly the same identity or roles but where it is the *fluidity*, the changing environments and contexts in which the hands get to work, which reveals the centrality of multimodality to understanding multilingualism. Here, there is no panopticon, nor centre of translation. The recycling logo captures this perfectly: the same element or entity can be performed in

many different ways, and can go through a number of permutations that change it in ways that keep some important features constant.

In 'fluid spatiality', topological invariance is when "entities may be similar and dissimilar at different locations within fluid space", and "may transform themselves without creating difference" (Law and Mol, 2001, p. 641). As with the example of a Zimbabwean bush pump that Law and Mol (2001) discuss, it is the slow, adaptive changes that the pump undergoes when adopted by different local communities with differing circumstances that ensure that the bush pump continues to do its job and fulfil its design. In a more familiar semiotic terminology, this conceptualization of multilingualism could be understood as *resemiotisation* or *recursive translation*, where the constancy is spread across different forms, which change with sometimes smaller or larger differences as time goes by and the forms adapt to context, but where the 'gist' remains roughly the same.

Group 4: Fire (Group members: Keshia Jansen, Sinovuyo Nikani, Alexa Anthonie & Ulrika Spannenberg-Europa)

Figure 5: Group 4's non-poster

Group 4 recount how they, in like manner to the other groups, struggled with hierarchical nature of the 'triangle', as they debated which aspect (people, space, affect, semiotic resources, etc) could be considered "most important" and placed at the apex of the triangle. They concluded that none of the concepts could be ranked as most significant, as

> (w)ithout People, the concept of multilingualism cannot exist. Space determines how people think and behave and, therefore, how they interact with speakers of different languages. Space even determines language use. Without Affect, there is no experience of genuine human connection.

They then tried to use a different shape – at one point, concentric circles – to best describe their idea of multilingualism, namely, as "a complex, non-hierarchical interconnection of People, Space and Affect" in which the value of one of these aspects shifts in relation to the others as the interactional context changes. They eventually decided to 'break out' of task format completely ("in a sort of protest against the idea of a two-dimensional poster"), choosing instead, to create what they refer to as a 'non-poster' to reflect the "dynamic", "fluid" and "diverse" nature of multilingualism (See Figure 5), Instead, they chose to create an artefact from differently sized paper circles and beverage coasters: cut, folded, decorated and arranged in a vertical format, with a water glass (which happened to be on their table) as a base. They argued that this decision allowed them to *constantly shift and rotate the artefact*, each time enabling a different disk (or aspect of multilingualism) to be elevated:

> Our 'non-poster' features interconnected colourful disks that represent the dynamic nature of multilingualism. We chose circles to represent the ongoing and cyclic patterns of multilingualism and communication. The moveable disks reflect how fluid multilingualism can be across different situations. Each disk is covered in a unique pattern to index linguistic and cultural diversity among people, as well as the various possible spaces and domains in which communication may take place. The different disks also index the three concepts of Affect, People and Space. The core idea for this artefact is that none of these aspects can be regarded as 'most important.' Multilingualism is highly contextualised and situated, and can therefore take many different forms. *Rotating the artefact places a different disk at the top, thereby prioritising a different aspect of multilingualism. What then becomes important is the constant shifting and rotating of the artefact*" (our emphasis).

They conclude their written piece with their definition for multilingualism as: "the movement of Affect between People in Spaces through Semiotic Resources." For Group 4, then, their discussion of multilingualism moved them into a spatial and geometric way of thinking, as they grappled to represent multilingualism in a non-hierarchical, three-dimensional form that allowed for the *constant shifting, rotating, and fluidity* that they felt was core to its conception.

This visualization of multilingualism departs quite radically from the other three offerings, as domain/region, relational network, and fluidity (iterative translation). Firstly, the switch to an n-dimensional artefact instead of a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional form comes about through 'cutting and gluing', which implies a *topological discontinuity* and allows further operations to come into play, such as *rotation*. The rotation aspect introduces *time* as a *fourth* dimension to the design. Rotation in turn opens up for a re-structuring of relationalities, in this case, by highlighting the relationship that the 'present surface' has with the 'absent surface': as the disc rotates, different surfaces become visible, although these surfaces are held together as 'front' and 'back' of the disc. The design thus incorporates an n-dimensional (i.e. spatial and temporal) aspect that variously highlight relationalities of presence and absence, or expressed differently, of *actuality* and *potentiality*, so that what in actual fact holds together the structure is the relation between what is 'visible' (present, highlighted) and what is 'hidden' (non-actualized, downplayed, alterity). Further, as pointed out by Law and Mol (2001), the *actual* is dependent on the *absence* of the Other. Law and Mol (2001) suggest that such topological characteristics are found in the spatial shape of 'fire'. They note that "whereas in fluidity constancy depends on gradual change, in a topology of fire constancy is

produced in abrupt and discontinuous movements" (2001: 615), adding that the "constancy of object presence depends on simultaneous absence or alterity" (2001, p. 615). In other words, what *is* simultaneously performs what *is not*.

In our discussion of the posters 2 and 3, we made reference to different forms of 'translation' or semiotic equivalences that could be said to capture the different relationalities between elements. It would appear that for Group 4, Viveiros de Castro's (2004) notion of 'equivocal translation' offers an appropriate representation of the plays of opacity between the presence and absence of the two sides of the rotating mobile (see also Menezes de Souza, 2017). The issue of equivocation arises generally not from a plurality of views on a single world (posters 1-3) which assumes a constancy in the relationship of elements to each other, but out of a *single view of different worlds* – namely, the perspective of the viewer, which remains 'stable' while the ontology of the space shifts depending on whether the front or back of the mobile takes on focality. The classic example of this offered by Viveiros de Castro (2004) is the jaguar and the human: when the jaguar is drinking 'manioc beer', the human sees it as drinking 'blood'. In other words, the perspective of each actor on their actions of drinking are equivalent in being informed by the same 'concept', namely, "a tasty, nutritious and heady brew" (2004, p. 6), but different in that they inhabit different ontologies. In other words, jaguars and humans have the same epistemology for different ontologies: they apply the same name to radically different things (blood and manioc beer). When applying these ideas to 'translation', Viveiros de Castro (2004, p. 10) argues the following:

> To translate is to situate oneself in the space of equivocation and to dwell there. It is not to unmake the equivocation (this would be to suppose it never existed in the first place) but precisely the opposite is true. To translate is to emphasize or potentialize the equivocation, that is, to open and widen the space imagined not to exist between the conceptual languages in contact, a space that the equivocation precisely concealed.

Our sense is that this is an ethically more demanding way of 'inhabiting' multilingualism (cf. Krog (2021) on 'rich points' in the translation of poetry from African languages to English). This visualization of multilingualism is one where opacity and equivocation determine how encounters and relationalities are semiotically managed. Law and Mol (2001: 615) emphasize how, "in order to establish meaning, it is necessary to go elsewhere" – to go beyond the expression itself. In a similar vein, Group 4 needed to move beyond the restrictions of the 'poster' – to cut and rupture the form – in order to express the full complexity of their understanding of multilingualism.

Discussion

All four visualizations, then, illustrate the topological thinking that Lucy *et al*, 2014 suggest is a culturally significant feature of our contemporary societies. We have suggested that all four topologies (multi-folded surfaces) capture some existing sense of multilingualism and its meanings in the world (cf. Heugh *et.al* 2021 on the plurality of understandings of *multilingualisms*) and can be associated with particular views on *semiotic permutations* (e.g. various forms of translation; notions such as resemiotisation; or new 'lingualisms' (e.g. polylingualism). In Groups 1 and 2, the organising principle is 'relationality *across* semiotic permutations', whereas in Groups 3 and 4 it is 'relationality *through* semiotic permutations'. In Group 3, change is of the essence in keeping elements and their relationalities intact (e.g. the flow of energy through the praying hands, the transformations of the elements in the recycling process), whereas in Group 4, change introduces discontinuity and a whole new order of arrangements of elements (the n-dimensional 'rotating mobile' poster). In both Groups 3 and 4, difference is at play: either through change that keeps a constant, or as an alterity or otherness that introduces a new relationality. In both cases, 'difference' is a condition for signification, not a hindrance (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

These four visualizations bring into focus *fluidity*, the *non-hierarchical*, and the *embodied* dimensions of language and multilingualism (eyes, body, fingers, form); they also foreground the crucial role of *affect* and *vulnerability*, and the *integrative, holistic* nature of semiosis. However, there is a tension in all the groups as to how to integrate these elements into relationalities in topological form. In Group 4, many of these tensions are resolved through the introduction of n-dimensionality. Over and above the abrupt discontinuity of the cutting and modelling, a further discontinuity can be found in the form of rotation in time: 'present' and the 'absent' – as one surface of the coaster obscures the other, so the form of the mobile is held intact.

In other contexts, we have introduced the idea of turbulence as an often overlooked dynamic in sociolinguistic continuity and change. Turbulence is an *upset* (like cutting and pasting) that creates new topological spaces, by realigning extant relationalities, creating new networks or matrices of engagement (even with absent others) and that introduces new actors. The effects of the turbulence of a shipwreck (Stroud, 2016), which spews cargo onto the beach, is that the contents (and junk) are subsequently put to use by other actors for other purposes in new networks of relationality. Turbulent happenings like cuttings and pastings imply a radical – and *unpredictable* - change of ontologies, and a different normative order, 'beyond reform' (Andreotti *et.al.* 2015).

A topological discontinuity that produces a new arrangement of relationalities can in this sense be seen to be the spatial equivalent of Linguistic Citizenship. One dimension of Linguistic Citizenship is the utopian idea of 'becoming', of entering into or building relationships severed from the inequities of the past. A further, related dimension, is the creation of new socialities through language, brought out in spaces of vulnerability with different Others, on the understanding that these socialities are the material of novel, new Selves. These dimensions of Linguistic Citizenship can be traced in Group 4's visualisation and focus on alterity and the novel unpredictability of rotation.

Linguistic Citizenship suggests that multilingualism has the potential to ethically engage with the Other through empathetic care of the vulnerabilities of Self and Other. Alterity – or, the state of being 'other' – is therefore a key aspect of a (new) sociality or relationality. At the same time, the non-actuality of the Other (on certain rotations) illustrates the virtual or utopian dimensions of Linguistic Citizenship (cf. Stroud, 2018) – the presence of absences, or potentials that could be actualized. This n-dimensional sculpture is therefore very well suited to grasping the potentiality into actuality and working with (ethical) relationalities to alterity inherent in our conception of Linguistic Citizenship.

Shapeshifters and shamans

The shift into the n-dimensional calls to mind the notion of 'shapeshifters' which suffuse indigenous thought and worldviews. We find suggestive parallels between the topologies of Linguistic Citizenship and shapeshifting. Shapeshifters permeate early forms of literature and remain a common trope in children's fantasy and popular culture. Think of the frog who becomes a prince, or the person who transforms into a vampire at night. Shapeshifting can be understood as the ability to physically transform through an inherently divine or superhuman ability. In the folktales of the |*Xam people* of Southern Africa, the key shapeshifter or trickster god is |*Kaggen*, who usually takes the form of praying mantis, but can shape shift into various other animal forms, including a bull eland, a snake, and a caterpillar (Hewitt, 1986).

Viveiros de Castro notes how shamans "see non-humans as they [non-humans] see themselves (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, p. xx; Lenaerts, 2006, p. xx) and notes how "the ability to shapeshift allows shamans to perceive the world from the point of view of other forms of personhood – jaguar personhood, anaconda personhood". And, further,

> (w)hat is at stake here is a temporary bodily process, whereby a human being assumes the embodied point of view of another species… There is no need to appeal to any sort of metaphoric sense here. A literal interpretation of this process of

disembodiment/re-embodiment is absolutely consistent with all what an Ashéninka knows and directly feels during this experience, in a quite physical sense. (Lenaerts, 2006, 13)

In other words, "Shamans embody the *transformational possibilities of subjectivity across persons and species* (Londono Sulkin 2005, p. 22, our emphasis). As argued by Viveiros de Castro, one of the principal tasks of the shaman is to 'translate' between different species and entities. Here their task is not to find the homonyms or equivalences between the different semiotic modes, but to keep open the space for the difference of meaning:

> Therefore, the aim of perspectivist translation … not that of finding a "synonym" (a co-referential representation) in our human conceptual language for the representations that other species of subject use to speak about one and the same thing. Rather, the aim is to avoid losing sight of the difference concealed within equivocal "homonyms" between our language and that of other species, since we and they are never talking about the same things. (2004, p. 7)

From the perspective of multilingualism, Shamanism is therefore one such area that can also be viewed in terms of semiotic permutations of *voice* and different forms and modalities for *agency*. We could also note that shapeshifting shares a number of semiotic and ethical dimensions with multilingualism. Shapeshifting is a way of engaging in relationalities of articulation with other ways of seeing or being. From the perspective of Linguistic Citizenship, then, shamans, by shapeshifting, manage tensions that cannot be managed through a world of constancy, namely interspecies engagement and understanding or an ethics of ecology. In shapeshifting, worlds otherwise separated are aligned in new relations. Interestingly, the ability to shapeshift is a synaesthesic experience – one that can be understood in terms of the confluence of multimodal and multiple sensory registers – a feeling *as/with*, or an affectual ethics of alterity.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to make a fantasy excursion (as we write this, the only excursions available in these times of the plague) into topological geometries of multilingualism as relationality. Topological multilingualism reinforces the idea that a fundamental condition for making sense for a better world is in practicing a discontinuity with disrespectful pasts through engagements with difference that respect the integrity of Otherness.

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