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Introduction: Changing Faces of Transnational Communities in Britain

Xiao Lan CURDT-CHRISTIANSEN
1 West North 3.01,
Department of Education, University of Bath
Bath BA2 7AY, United Kingdom
Email: x.curdt-christiansen@bath.ac.uk

ZHU Hua,
School of Education,
Edgbaston, University of Birmingham,
Birmingham B15 2TT, UK
Email: h.zhu.3@bham.ac.uk

LI Wei
UCL Centre for Applied Linguistics, UCL Institute of Education, University
College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK
Email: Li.wei@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

In this editorial introduction, we outline the key conceptualisations and overarching questions of this collection of studies on the changing faces of the transnational communities in Britain. Using the nexus of migration and language as our critical lens, we examine the internal diversities within the transnational communities in Britain, evident in the emergence of groups differing on migration trajectories, social and educational backgrounds, linguistic repertoires, and status assigned to community languages. We also explore how language shapes, and is shaped by, these internal diversities and wider socio-cultural-political dynamics and pay particular attention to the multilingual and translanguaging practices in these communities. We demonstrate how these communities function as sites for contestation of language and identity that can be conflictual as well as a source of othering. The introduction concludes with an outline of the contributions made by the studies in this special issue, highlighting the key claims put forward by the contributors.

Keywords: internal diversity, transnational community, identity, multilingualism, social group, inequality

1. Introduction

In the past decades, the UK has witnessed great changes in patterns of migration, linguistic and cultural practices, and ethnicity (e.g., Arnaut 2012; Li Wei and Zhu Hua 2019; Vertovec 2007; 2019). While these changes have been explored by scholars from different fields of migration and ethnicity studies with regard to migrants' different settlement patterns, social status, and divergent labour experiences, internal diversity within the transnational communities in Britain has attracted little attention. Internal diversity refers to differences within the same transnational community due to pre- and post- migration experiences including language experience and sense of belonging.

This thematic issue has been developed to address the internal differences observed within British transnational communities. It responds to the increasing diversification within communities where people may share ethnicity, traditions, religious beliefs and cultural practices, but may also differ with regard to language abilities, social class and education (Creese & Blackledge 2012; Meissner 2016; Vertovec 2019). Questioning the assumption that transnational communities are homogenous and based on ethnicity alone, this thematic issue brings together seven papers on different transnational communities, Chinese, Polish, Somalian, Greek, Italian, Lebanese and Sri Lankan, to demonstrate that a single ethnic categorisation is no longer adequate to understand minority communities when it comes to their challenges, needs, affiliations, linguistic configurations, and integration in and contributions to the host society.

The conceptualisation of the special issue has been developed from our project of a multi-level (national, community and family level) investigation of family language policies in the UK, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (see details of the project: <https://familylanguagepoli.wixsite.com/familylanguagepolicy>). This is the second large-scale, nation-wide project, undertaken 30 years after Alladina and Edwards' (1991) project on *Multilingualism in the British Isles* which focused on speech communities from Africa, the Middle East and Asia in the UK. This special issue draws the findings from the community level of the investigation, aimed to understand where internal divisions exist and how communities respond to issues of internal divisions, new identities in migration, multidimensional categories, and new social formations.

Much research on transnational communities in the UK has centred on one or two aspects, such as the social function of heritage language schools (Curdt-Christiansen 2006; Li Wei, 2016; Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2014), or heritage language and identity (Curdt-Christiansen, 2020; Little, 2017; Zhu Hua & Li Wei, 2019). Internal diversities, caused by differences in country of origin, migration trajectory, language attitudes, linguistic varieties, sense of belonging, identity, and socio-political affiliation, have not received much attention, despite its potential in opening up a space for “rethinking patterns of inequality, prejudice and segregation” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015:543). Recognising internal diversities also has an important policy implication: i.e., one-size-fit-all policies can be problematic when working with transnational communities.

Because language plays an important role in mediating, negotiating and shaping the process of migration (Canagarajah 2017; Zhu Hua and Li Wei 2019), all papers in the issue critically examine the centrality of language in relation to social differences as reflected in shifting linguistic configurations and language inflicted inequality. They do so by answering the following questions:

1. What are the changing features and characteristics of internal diversities within transnational communities?
2. How do community members in these communities negotiate multiple linguistic repertoires and mediate sociocultural practices?
3. How do communities function as sites for contestation of language and identity that can be conflictual as well as sites for reproducing linguistic hierarchy?

2. Communities in Britain: Changing patterns and internal diversities

Over the past decades, the UK has witnessed massive new movements of people not only from new countries of origin but also from countries that have a long history of emigration to the UK (Vertovec 2007; Wessendorf 2019). Communities have thus been formed, renewed and changed. Of these communities, some are well established with a long history such as the Chinese, some are well recognised because of colonial history such as the South Asians, some have seen new arrivals of skilled workers following European Union's 2004 enlargement policy such as the Polish, and some have arrived quite recently because of protracted war in their home countries, such as Somalia and Lebanon. These old, new, big,

small, well organised and legally differentiated transnational communities have enriched UK’s linguistic landscape and contributed to the vibrant multicultural practices as illustrated by the following statistics.

By the end of 2019, it was reported that 6.2 million people, comprising 9% of the total population of the UK, had a foreign nationality (Migration Statistics, 2020). This number represented an annual average immigration of 37,000 in the period 1991 to 1995 up to an annual average of 266,000 in the period 2015 to 2019. Net migration was estimated to be 313,000 in the year ending March 2020 (Home office 2020). While immigrants were coming from an increasing number of countries of origin, the top countries of birth for the foreign-born residents in the UK were India, Poland and Pakistan (Migration Observatory <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk>).

In this thematic issue, seven transnational communities are included because of their distinctive sociopolitical contexts of migration, demographic characteristics, and multilingual histories. Through community profiling, we gain insights into the different migration experiences, linguistic and educational backgrounds and resettlement patterns that strongly influence the community members’ attitudes and ideologies towards developing their hybrid and situated identities. Table 1 shows the demographic information about the communities.

Table 1: Demographic & linguistic information about the communities in Britain (2011 Census data)

Community	Resident population	% of total population	Main Languages Spoken in addition to English	Migration Background
Chinese	433,150	0.7	Putonghua, Cantonese, Hakka	Long-term settlement from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore; recent migration from China, Taiwan
Polish	579,121	1.0	Polish, German	EU migration
Somali	99,484	0.1	Somali, Arabic	Refugees, within EU family reunion
Sri Lankan	170,000	0.3	Tamil	Refugees, within EU family reunion
Italian	233,000	0.4	Italian, Sicilian, Neapolitan	EU migration
Greek	300,000	0.5	Greek	EU migration
Lebanese	150,935	0.2	Arabic, French	Middle East migration

One of the key features of the papers in this issue is the many languages and skills that the transnational migrants bring with them through different migration experiences. According to census data, there are more than 360 languages used by a million children in UK schools

(DfE 2018). In our Family Language Policy project, we conducted a national survey on language practices in transnational communities across the UK and found that there were 40 languages used in the participating families, including Greek, Chinese Mandarin, Chinese Cantonese, Russian, Aymara, Spanish, Japanese, Polish, German, Portuguese, Somali, Italian, Arabic, Thai, Finnish, Urdu, and Punjabi (Curdt-Christiansen 2019). These community/home languages together with English play a central role in the immigrants' everyday mundane life when they make sense of their transnational experiences, adapting to local sociocultural practices and forming new identities.

Another key feature illustrated by all papers in this special issue, is the presence of many different social groups within the communities. Abdullahi and Li Wei's study involves two generations of Somalis. Curdt-Christiansen and Huang explore social changes caused by the different social and educational backgrounds of recent immigrants in the Chinese communities. Kozminska and Zhu Hua compare Polish organisations for immigrants in post-WII and post-EU accession. In the context of the Greek community, Karatsareas examines the ideology of authenticity of Greek between post-2010 immigrants and the existing Greek Cypriot community members. Sakanran situates her study in the context of recent onward migration movements with a focus on different generations of Sri Lankans moving from EU countries. Pepe explores post-2008 Italian migrants regarding their perceptions of 'Italian community'. In the Lebanese community, Eid and Sallabank examine language attitudes towards different forms of Arabic as heritage language from the perspectives of parents and their children.

The reality of diversity reflected in the diversified social groups, cross-cutting categories and multiple languages has shed light on our understanding of different migration pathways. In this thematic issue, all papers situate their studies in the historical context of their respective community by critically examining the trajectories of cultural and linguistic development in relation to different waves of migration. The papers emphasise community as a symbolic space that connects the past with the present, traditions with modernity, home country with host society, and local with global.

3. Shifting Linguistic Configurations and Negotiating Repertoires

Canagarajah (2017) points out that the nexus of migration and language can provide a critical lens to understand how new social constructs and experiences are defined and

framed. In this thematic issue, all authors address the new forms of social relations by exploring how language shapes and is shaped by different socio-cultural-political forces. The authors have paid particular attention to the multilingual and translanguaging practices in these communities.

Sakanran reports on the evolving linguistic practices in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and looks at how changing mobility patterns have influenced Tamil language development of migrants with different generations and migration trajectories. Her study is situated in the context of the relocation movement of Sri Lankans who had claimed asylum and were granted refugee status. Because of the EU mobility framework, many of her participants had chosen to become 'onward' migrants (Puppa and King 2019) or *new citizens* (Lindley and Van Hear 2007) in the UK. The relocation movement has changed the linguistic repertoires of these new citizens as they brought with them European languages which they had acquired into their language practices. Using *communicative repertoire* as the theoretical framework, she argues that the definition of Tamil needs to take into consideration different registers, languages and styles that have been influenced by people's onward migration. The sociolinguistic features of Tamil show the creative use of communicative resources to which they have access and demonstrate the complex migration journeys they have endured when re-grouping and integrating into new transnational relations. These onward EU Sri Lankan Tamils have complicated the traditional migrant language practices in diaspora, thus changed the sociolinguistic profile of Tamil speaking communities in the UK.

Similarly, the Somali community also has onward migrants who brought European languages into their linguistic repertoire. Although Abdullahi and Li Wei's study focuses on other language-related issues within the community, an onward linguistic phenomenon has also been observed.

In 'single migration' contexts, multilingual practices are not less observed. Pepe's study explored language ideologies and practices of the post-2008-crisis Italian migrants in London. She situates her context by providing historical development of the Italian communities in the UK and critically discusses how language practices and educational levels of Italian migrants have changed the community outlook and contributed to internal diversity. Using recorded social interactions and interviews as data sources, Pepe demonstrates how translanguaging as a social identity distinguishes these new post-crisis immigrants from their earlier counterparts. While acknowledging that national-based Italian

communities exist in the UK, these post-crisis migrants disavow or even deny the existence of such an ethno/national/location-based community. These 'new' and younger generation migrants question the ethno or national categorisation of immigrant communities by (un)intentionally engaging in multilingual practices.

Multilingualism has been a salient phenomenon in transnational communities across the UK and in many migration countries in the world (Canagarajah 2017; Li Wei 2018; Martin-Jones, Blackledge and Creese 2015). The communities involved in this special issue are no exceptions as they comprise members from different waves of migration who have different migration status. In the Chinese community, Curdt-Christiansen and Huang show that Chinese migrants use varieties of Chinese language as well as other named languages depending on their countries of origin, levels of education and other social factors. Multilingualism is particularly pronounced in the Lebanese community where the older generation of migrants speak French, modern standard Arabic and colloquial Arabic. In the longer established Greek community, Karatsareas reports that the multilingual and multidialectal practices are part of the linguistic repertoire of people with a Greek Cypriot background.

The movements of people in recent decades illustrate clearly a shift in linguistic configurations in transnational communities. Martin-Jones, Blackledge and Creese (2015:9) observed that linguistic configurations often include "urban popular cultural forms, minority linguistic forms, hybridities and inventions". The articles in the special issue show different ways in which language repertoires are used and formed in these communities. They also provide insights into the complexity of the co-existing linguistic systems in the wider communicative society. While multilingualism is an observable common phenomenon and often used in political discourse in the UK, languages are not equally valued. Within the communities, multilingualism can be a source of tension for legitimacy, ownership, and identity.

4. Sites of Contestation: Language, Identity, Hierarchy

When newcomers and longer-settled migrants from the same community co-habit in a country, tensions can arise because of differences in migration experiences, social classes, self-identifications, and linguistic preferences. Much research into linguistic diversities has demonstrated that social inequalities exist between groups, especially between minority

and mainstream groups. The papers in this issue, however, show that internal diversities can also be sources of power struggle. Which language can be claimed as a 'legitimate' language as the medium of instruction, which language variety should be chosen to represent the community, and which language has more economic-political power have been consistent questions throughout the papers in this collection. These questions are directly related to issues of legitimacy and identity (affiliation), authenticity and nationalism, hierarchy and power.

Karatsareas addresses the issue of 'legitimacy' in the Greek complementary schools by exploring how migrants perceive authenticity of Greek language in the UK. He found that although the Cypriots speak both standard and Cypriot varieties of Greek, they are not perceived as speakers of 'correct' and 'proper' Greek, and therefore not considered as legitimate and suitable teachers to teach Greek in the schools. This has caused tensions and created hierarchical orders between members of the transnational Hellenic communities

Curd-Christiansen and Huang look at the process of legitimisation of Putonghua as the language of instruction in community schools and the community's lingua franca in the Chinese communities. Their findings suggest that the legitimisation of Putonghua is strongly influenced by and related to the economic and political power that China has gained in recent years. Other varieties of Chinese, such as Cantonese and Hakka, have been pushed to the periphery in the process of Putonghua legitimisation. 'Putonghuanisation', thus, has widened the gap between speakers of different varieties in addition to their social status and political affiliations.

Kozminska and Zhu Hua's study also addresses issues of legitimacy. They found that, despite differences in waves of migration and related social status, a strong 'standard Polish only' policy is advocated to reinforce an image of the transnational Polish community "as permanent, uncontested and defined by unchanging roots" (Kozminska and Zhu: this issue). The legitimisation of pure Polish in both language and culture is aligned with the nationalist ideology. The authors argue that the 'pure Polish' ideology has helped to "erase and marginalise other linguistic phenomena and experiences of migration from the institutionalised discourse".

In their study of the Lebanese community, Eid and Sallabank question the multilingual reality in the community. With regard to developing Lebanese Arabic (LA) as a

heritage language, the participants feel that they are losing the battle ground when competing with other European languages for their children's future education.

Abdullahi and Li Wei, in their study, observe how literacy practices in English are emphasised because of the practical and educational importance English entails compared to literacy practices in Somali, which are uncommon in both homes and the community. Somalians have experienced racial discrimination and social prejudice in Britain. This has "pushed the older generations to hold firmly onto their cultural heritage including language", but the younger generation to "forge a new and complex Somali-British identity" with little knowledge of Somali language (Abdullahi and Li Wei: this issue).

Identity is a complex social construct as it indexes individuals' affiliations which are determined by their access to "material and symbolic resources" and conditioned by "recognised legitimacy and respect" (Block 2018:574). Identity in transnational contexts is even more compounded when people negotiate their identities in relation to both the 'homeland' and the 'hostland' as illustrated by the studies in this issue.

While languages and codes do co-exist in a globalised world, and "layered simultaneity" (Blommaert 2005; 2010) is visibly observable in neighbourhoods, not all languages and language speakers are perceived as equals. On the contrary, language prejudice is found in every corner of our society. Linguistic hierarchies invoke power relations in multilingual societies where transnational communities are particularly concerned (Arnaut 2012; Blommaert 2010; Pillar 2016). All contributors have explicitly or implicitly discussed this critical 'multilingual turn' in their paper (Duchêne 2011; Kubata 2016; 2020; May 2014). The studies illustrate that recognised legitimacy can set up further linguistic hierarchies and widen intergroup differences. They contribute to the ongoing discussion of critical sociolinguistics of diversity (Arnaut 2012; Vertovec 2007; 2019).

5. Conclusion

The transnational communities in Britain each have their distinctive socio-political context of migration, demographic character and multilingual history. As communities are networks of social relations and linguistic havens, the sociolinguistic profiling of communities enables us to gain insight into different traditions, sociocultural values and political positions within and between communities. The findings from these empirical studies have also enabled us to understand how different migration experiences, different

linguistic and educational backgrounds, different resettlement patterns and different community language status contribute to social differences constructed through power relations. In this regard, communities become sites of contestation for languages and identities in which community members are often caught between an urge to maintain loyalty to the past (home country) and a pragmatic need to integrate into the mainstream society. They can also become sites for negotiation of linguistic practices – spaces for translanguaging and identity work.

The issue contributes to the field by highlighting the internal diversities within the transnational communities and the critical role language plays in contributing to these internal diversities and ‘superdiversity’ in present-day UK (Vertovec, 2007). With a focus on the context of Britain, the studies in the issue have enhanced our theoretical understanding of the role of multilingualism and transnational communities in the construction of power-relationships and social inequality in a society. The findings of the various papers in this issue, thus, offer a new lens to understand the nuanced linguistic and identity practices of community speakers and the evolving roles of transnational communities in the UK.

The special issue contributes to the field of sociology of language as sociolinguistic community profiling allows us to look at social changes from the temporal-spatial perspectives through the trajectories from the past to the present, as well as the projection of the present to the future. Methodologically, the contributors have adopted a historical perspective and contemporary sociolinguistic performance of transnational communities to understand the way in which languages and their speakers are influenced, regulated and changed according to how language, society, community and self are understood (Foucault 2007; Blommaert 2010). We hope the findings have contributed to the field of migration studies by illustrating how conceptions of multilingualism and ‘diversity’ are manifested in the struggle of minority vs. majority language, migrant language vs. English, and transnational vs. multilingual practices.

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