

Umberto Ansaldo, *Contact languages. Ecology and evolution in Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xxvii + 257 pp. ISBN 978-0-68253-4.

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The study of contact languages is not one of those areas in linguistics where there is a strong data bias that favours European, global, or national languages. Yet Ansaldo's focus on Asia is a welcome addition to a series of compilations on the subject that have hitherto tended to prioritise either particular types of structural outcomes of contact (pidginisation, creolisation, mixed languages, convergent areas) or else other regional contexts such as the Caribbean and West Africa. Drawing on work by Mufwene (2001), the author favours the notion of 'linguistic ecologies', which he uses to refer to the complexity of social relations and interaction patterns within communities and societies. The notion of 'ecologies' also captures the realisation that social relations contribute substantially to shaping multilingual practices and therefore also to shaping their structural outcomes in the form of structural innovation and language change. As Ansaldo suggests in his statement of aims, the consequences of ecological variation "lie in the different grammatical outputs of the language restructuring process" (p.6). But in the Asian context 'language ecology' also takes on the more literal meaning of identifying how linguistic practices correlate with climate and geography. What is particular about the Asian context — or 'Monsoon Asia', as the author defines the region under investigation — is the way in which patterns of trade, and therefore the drive to attain and exercise power, follow the locations of ports and the seasonal conditions set by the monsoon. The mixture of cultures in the region reflects the dispersion of merchant communities along the coastal trade routes. These, in turn, were responsible for population and labour movements and the emergence of networks of power and exchange. They also shaped the dissemination of ideologies, beliefs, and written traditions. The main point about the geo-climatic conditions of the monsoon region is that they allow predictable seasonal navigation (following the pattern of winds from northeast to southwest and back), and so historically they encouraged both exploration and population dispersion without the loss of cultural ties between home communities and remote outposts.

After summarising his research questions and committing to a functionalist approach to the analysis of language change or 'linguistic evolution' (Chapter 1),

Ansaldo offers a detailed and highly informative historical account of trade and power relations in the region, from the medieval Sino-Javanese networks and Mongol conquests on to European colonisation (Chapter 2). Special attention is given to the role of city-ports and to marriage patterns and bondage in determining traditional relations among social groups, and then to the impact of Western influence, which set new demarcation lines, both social and ethnic. Under the heading 'Linguistic ecologies', Chapter 3 contains a socio-historical overview and in effect an inventory of the linguistic varieties of the region, focusing on Malay and Portuguese (the author also promises on p. 53 to introduce Sinitic as the 'third main player', but mention of Sinitic languages in this chapter focuses mainly on their structural contributions to Malay-based contact varieties).

In Chapter 4 on 'Methodological issues', Ansaldo returns to some of the theoretical dilemmas of contact linguistics already hinted at in the introductory chapter. His aim is clearly to position himself before introducing the book's original theoretical outlook; but readers will also find the concise reference to an assembly of prominent sources extremely useful as an introductory text on structuralism and post-structuralism, historical linguistics, contact linguistics, and general sociolinguistics.

In the second half of the book, Ansaldo presents his principal innovative message, which is that multilingual settings offer learners (i.e. individuals acquiring the use of language) a multitude of different options to choose from, and greater freedom to be creative and innovative. Chapter 5 on 'Contact language formation in evolutionary theory' offers a summary of this model. Once again there are excursions into brief introductory reviews of foundation literature on behavioural theory and language acquisition, and, following in the footsteps of Croft's (2000) 'evolutionary' approach to language change, also of some of the principles of variation, selection, and propagation in natural evolution. With these explained, Ansaldo finally embarks on the actual data-driven discussion of 'Contact language formation', in Chapters 6–8 of the book. The first case study (Chapter 6) features Sri Lanka Malay. Ansaldo views this language as a contact variety with a trilingual base, which employs lexical items from Malay with grammatical features from Sinhala and Tamil. The language arose through the re-location of Malays to Sri Lanka by the Dutch and British colonial powers. It shows agglutinative nominal case markers, which have previously been discussed as evidence of convergence with the contact languages Tamil and Sinhala (cf. Bakker 2006). Ansaldo regards these as the natural product of a selection process by which features that are shared by the two contact languages are mapped onto the heritage- or identity-language Malay. By contrast, the Sri Lankan Malay system of TMA marking differs from those of its contact languages (it is pre-verbal rather than post-verbal, and shows different semantic distinctions). Ansaldo relates this to the differences among the

two contact languages in TMA formation. The ‘ecological’ argument is that greater congruence among the contact languages will result in multilingual speakers producing high token frequencies of the shared structures. This constitutes the selection trigger that motivates speakers to replicate these structures in their ‘identity’ language, Malay. Change is then licensed in the first instance through the ‘ecological’ shift in the position of Malay as one out of a repertoire of three community languages, and the consequent relaxation of normative pressure to preserve historical structures. The argument is hard to dismiss, but it might have been illustrated more convincingly through wider exemplification from the two contact languages.

This angle is strengthened in the following chapter (Chapter 7), however, where Ansaldo discusses various structural features of a number of other Malay contact varieties (such as Bazaar Malay and Cocos Malay) and compares them with the Sinitic and European contact languages. The point argued for is that congruence among the structures of the participating languages is a more attractive explanation for structural change than the influence of just a single adstrate language. The functional rationale is provided by the notion of ‘identity alignment’ — the idea that contact language formation is a product of the convergence of cultural identities, which in turn favours the generalisation and adoption of practices shared by the participating communities. Chapter 8 contains an application of the model to the formation of China Coast Pidgin, in an attempt to explain what mechanisms are behind what is often regarded as the structural simplicity of pidgins. Most of the chapter is devoted to the historical background and an overview of the structures of this variety. In the following discussion Ansaldo rejects the traditional notion that the pidgin emerged as an attempt by Chinese speakers to replicate English as a prestige language. Rather, the pidgin, it is argued, emerged out of the strictly defined communication needs of a niche encounter context, which Ansaldo characterises as an environment that is distinct from its ‘neighbouring ecologies’.

Overall, I found the theoretical argument convincing, and as a non-specialist on this particular region of the world, I learned a lot from the wealth of background information on the climate, history, and social relations among its populations. The publisher and series editor should be commended for making this book available in paperback format: There are some minor formal irritations — the index seems to list cited authors only very selectively, and some language names (such as ‘Arabic’ and ‘Gujarati’) are missing — but on the whole I found the text to be very suitable for beginners as well as specialists, and I would certainly recommend it as a secondary textbook for students of linguistics and related areas.

References

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