Lisa Lim and Umberto Ansaldo


Considering the impressive body of general (introductory) literature on language contact already published, studies, moreover, that treat the subject from all conceivable perspectives (starting with the seminal study of Weinreich (1953); followed by, a.o. Appel and Muysken (1987); Thomason (2001); Winford (2003); Matras (2009)) the reader is curious to know what a new ‘general’ book on Language Contact may have to add. Well, this book appears to add many things, as will transpire from this review.

Lim is a phonetician working on World Englishes, Ansaldo a creolist and typologist specialising in Sinitic varieties. In this book they bring their fields of expertise together. As the authors rightly note in the preface of the book, World Englishes versus Pidgins and Creoles are ‘almost always written about as separate animals’ (p. xi). It is an explicit objective of this book to integrate perspectives and research from the fields of multilingualism and code-switching, language shift and endangerment, and language and globalisation, Pidgin and Creole studies, and World Englishes studies. Integrated perspectives are indeed what we need, the authors argue, because many linguistic outcomes of contact are similar and/or the result of similar social and sociolinguistic processes worldwide.

The book has ambitious objectives. In the introductory Chapter 1 the authors state explicitly that ‘the most powerful approach to language contact is a sociolinguistic one’ (p. 3). Therefore they intend to take a sociolinguistic approach. In addition, the book wants to cover the new sites of contact that globalisation affords, such as computer mediated communication, popular culture, the commodification of language in the globalised economy. Moreover, the authors, whose expertise is on Asian contexts of language contact, want to emphasise the Asian perspective and foreground Asian studies on language contact (their own and those of others), involving languages as typologically diverse as Sinitic, Dravidian, Austronesian and other non-Indo-European varieties. The examples are equally drawn from studies on the Asian context. As Lim and Ansaldo rightly remark, studies on language and language contact have for the larger part been done from an (indo-)European perspective, with the ensuing European bias. All in all, the book has set multiple and ambitious goals, nonetheless the body of the text consists of a mere 204 pages.

The book has eight chapters. Chapter 1 sets the scene and offers an outline of the main tenets of the book. Here the basic point is made that acknowledging
that “anything goes” as a defining principle of language contact is not admitting defeat; quite the contrary, it is a step forward in understanding that, if constraints exist, they must be sought outside grammar, in sociolinguistic patterns of language use’ (p. 3). This is, the authors propose, corroborated by three different fields of inquiry, the first being linguistic typology, where the central objective should not be to find universals, but rather to account for diversity, the second being usage-based approaches. The third, and the field of inquiry that is the most explicitly considered in this study, is the concept of language evolution, which recognises that contact between different linguistic features is a fundamental underlying force in language evolution at large.

A central concept in the language evolution model is the (multilingual) language ecology, in which social, historical, contextual, interactional and linguistic factors determine the linguistic choices speakers make to solve communicative issues. Central in this model is the metaphor of the ‘pool of features’ (Mufwene, 2001; Aboh and Ansaldo, 2007), the highly varied repertoire of linguistic features from which speakers make their choices according to contextual needs, a metaphor to which Ansaldo adds (Ansaldo, 2009) ‘the typological matrix’: from the pool of features the speaker is more likely to choose features that are the most frequent (or ‘salient’, but that term is a bit problematic as will be discussed below), for example because these features are present in the majority of variants that take part in the feature pool.

Chapter 1 continues with a very condensed version of the kind of overview found in other introductory books as well (e.g. Winford, 2003): Borrowing, Code mixing, contact languages, linguistic areas. This is followed by a discussion on the ‘Asian perspective’, in which the authors offer some critical notes on modern linguistics and contact linguistics, more specifically Creole linguistics that—until recently—has focussed on Carribean Creoles with the ensuing Indo-European bias. The chapter then turns to a more elaborate discussion of the role of globalisation in language contact, referring to Vertovec’s (2006) concept of ‘superdiversity’ and referring to Blommaert (2010). Citing Heller (2010) the authors identify four direct consequences that globalisation has for language, viz. wider and transnational networks and increased communication across cultures and languages; a wider repertoire of forms of communication used by a broader set of social actors; a tension between relatively anonymous transferable forms of standardisation versus situated, identifiable forms of authenticity; and, as a consequence of a large shift to service-sector work, a central role for (computer mediated) language in the global economy. At the end of Chapter 1 the authors express their trust that their book will be of interest not only to linguists, but also to those who are interested in the interaction