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Discussion: Language in nature resource economies

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1 Introduction

The exploitation of nature resources is a complex enterprise embedded in a network of intertwined ecological, social, political and economic interests and investment. These often overlap, compete and oppose each other, making both the governance and development of nature resource economies a volatile business. While exploitation and protection of air, water, and land are of continuing interest in the fields of ecology, law and geography, for instance, there are only a few studies that have examined language in nature resource economics (related to mining see, for example, Bell [2017], Brown [2008], Hiss [2017]). This is why the current special issue “Language in the mines” is a welcome and timely opening for research on the multiple ways that language matters in the extraction, circulation and protection of nature resources.

This special issue focuses on language issues and phenomena related to mining activities from a comparative perspective. The case studies come from Africa, South America and Europe, and they discuss some key issues related to language in mining environments including language contact, multilingual practices, and migration and multi-ethnic composition of the work force. Language resources in the mines vary from big global languages to various dialects and their combinations (Pecht this issue) and creative mixtures that form a specific language used in and for mining, developing from a multilingual contact (Cornips and de Rooij this issue), or for political contexts related to the rights of the miners (Mesthrie this issue). Historical analysis of mining vocabulary shows how multilingualism was managed in mines already in the eighteenth century (Muysken this issue). Multilingual environments and linguistic integration can turn some language resources into a secret code (Lopez this issue) and resources for linguistic and cultural innovations (Marzo this issue). With their rich data and detailed analysis, the articles in this special issue speak volumes about the significance of language in mines.

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As discussed in this special issue, mines continue to be a complex site of harm and hope linked to risks and gains within the industry. The harms are related not only to the severe environmental risks but also to the past and present exploitation and inequalities often related to the colonial and post-colonial conditions of mining. The possible gains are linked to global investments, economic profits and developing infrastructure. The contested but expanding use of natural resources creates continuing debate over legitimate access to these resources, sustainable economic development and just distribution of profit. For example, in our on-going *Cold Rush* research project¹ on language and identity in expanding arctic economies, we examine tensions between the mining, tourism and commercial berry and mushroom gathering industries in Lapland, the Arctic area of Finland. The latter two economies rely on the image of untouched wild nature, which does not easily coincide with mining activity. These tensions and contradictions in the economic hotspots of natural resource extraction industries, and especially the ways in which people manage them, provide a lens for us to examine how language is mobilised to legitimise particular interests and boundary-making activities in discursive and material struggle over the surface and sub-surface resources of the land. Next, I will briefly discuss three intersecting research topics that seem to be central when examining the ways in which language matters in nature resource economics. They are *multilingualism*, *mobility* and *discourses on work*.

2 Multilingual mines

As in many other workplaces, language skills are used in mining as a criterion to include or exclude people from particular jobs, career trajectories or access to training. Language skills or lack of them are used to justify a particular organisation of mining work related to bodies, ethnicity and class (see, for example, Mesthrie this issue). In her research on diamond mines in Canada's Northwest Territories, Bell (2017) shows how soft skills training for indigenous people, including language skills, is used to groom people to do extractive work and hang on to the hope of getting a job in the future, while they are actually a surplus workforce. Similarly, multilingualism in mines can be valued, disregarded and managed in various ways. Language training in global languages,

¹ Cold Rush project (<https://coldrushresearch.com/>) is funded by the Academy of Finland.

mainly in English, may also be a route to work-related mobility or an asset in working with multinational subcontractors (cf. Pietikäinen and Strömmer 2018). In anticipation of future automatisations of mining work, it can be speculated that English combined with literacy and IT-skills will become a winning combination for future mining jobs even in the pit.

3 Mining mobility

Mining work forms a somewhat contradictory configuration of time and place: the mining itself cannot be outsourced outside of the pit whereas much of the marketing, financing and management of the mine can be global. Furthermore, while the environmental impact of mining is centuries long, usually the expected lifespan of a particular mine is relatively short, just a few decades. In addition, depending on the price of a particular mineral on global markets, the mines might be closed and re-opened several times. This back-and-forth movement creates a demand for mobile, flexible workers.

At these moments of mobility, language skills are valued differently. Often work in the pit is considered a version of silent, manual work where requirements for a shared language is minimal, only needed for the basic organisation of work and safety issues. Here, the emphasis is on able bodies rather than a skilled workforce. For example, in peripheries such as Arctic Lapland, this construction of work functions as an argument for the mining industry providing work for people and for areas that have a history of high unemployment, regardless of their previous experience or training in mining work. At the other end of the spectrum of mining mobility are the skilled experts, often imported from elsewhere, who are typically speakers of a global language. In today's Lapland these experts are often from Canada, one of the world's leading mining countries in the Arctic areas. However, three hundred years ago when the mining industry started in the North, the leaders were French-speaking Walloons from Belgium. Then as today the local communities are confronted with the powers of capital investments and the circulation of different types of workers who require infrastructure and services, like language provision, housing and schooling, which the local communities may or may not struggle to provide. Sometimes the newcomers may make scant resources even slimmer, sometimes they may reinvigorate economies in peripheral service centres. These contradictions indicate how economic development of mining industry is intertwined with cultural transformation and political interests.

4 Discourses of mining work

Mining is a controversial industry, invested with a range of risks and profits for different stakeholders. These concerns make *discourse* – understood in a Foucauldian sense, not merely as language use but also as a form of power/knowledge – a key terrain for a critical language research (cf. Foucault 1980; Määttä and Pietikäinen 2014). They point to discourse as a key nexus for contemporary struggles over resources and regulation in mining work. The ways in which these tensions are managed on the ground – for example through recruitment practices, labour policies and publicity discourses – reveal how discourses on rights and belonging, work and identity, safety and risks, for instance, are mobilised to legitimise particular interests and activities in discursive and material struggles over the nature resources. For example, in the economic development of Finnish Lapland through investment in nature resources, we have noticed that discourse of “good work” (Poschen 2015) is one of the key circulating discourses, especially in relation to the economic revitalisation of places that are understood as peripheries under the nation state logic. In the Finnish Arctic context, mining has a dual role: on the one hand, it is considered as providing “good jobs” in terms of full-time employment and all-year-around contracts, thus offering continuity and security. On the other hand, with its potentially severe environmental risks, the mining industry is seen as threatening the development of other nature resource industries, like nature tourism or commercial berry and mushroom picking, thus endangering green jobs and services jobs in these sectors. In this context, old and new discourses of mining work as “decent” and “real” work are opposed to other forms of work in the region (Pietikäinen and Allan forthcoming). These discourses do affective work too: they may convey affective attachments to past, historical Fordist institutions and forms of belonging that are imagined as providing relative economic security and well-being (Muehlebach and Shoshan 2012; Pietikäinen and Allan forthcoming). Alternatively, they may also construct mining as non-sustainable, non-viable work, holding particular regions and communities back. These kind of affective attachments to particular forms of work shape current struggles over local economic and political development. Under the precarious Arctic conditions, what becomes understood and valued as real, desirable or unwanted work is consequential, impacting people’s interest in becoming mobile or staying rooted, and municipalities’ willingness to invest in infrastructure such as housing and schools.

5 Rhizomes and regimes of language in nature resource economies

Economic investment in nature resources is one example of a linguistic, political, ecological and economic nexus, where ephemeral mobility, unplanned multilingualism and dislocation of traditional political strategies are among the new conditions and consequences of current economic, ecological and cultural changes as well as continuities. Such a complex nexus requires research that not only attends to language practices, but also takes into account the grounded knowledge, experiences and practices of the people who are living out these changes as well as the circulating discourses constituting and impacting the ways in which these developments and their consequences are understood, valued and changed. There are several frameworks for studying complex, evolving processes and phenomenon, such as nexus analysis and multisided ethnography, to name a few (see e.g. Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar 2018; Scollon and Scollon 2007).

Rhizomatic understandings of interrelations and intersectionality of different methods and frameworks is one way to explore complex, ongoing multiplicities (Pietikäinen 2015, 2016). Drawing on work by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) *rhizome* can be applied as a theoretical metaphor for an interconnected and irreducible multiplicity of ongoing processes. It is a conceptualisation of knowledge that can account for resilience, heterogeneity, interconnectivity, and multiplicity among the nodes in a network. It resists tree-like concepts of knowledge that chart causality along chronological lines, and favours instead a nomadic system of movement. From this perspective, language is conceptualised as discursively constructed through social interaction, under particular conditions, and inextricably linked to transformations in the political and economic world (Pietikäinen 2016). From this perspective, language is deeply consequential as it occupies an important nexus in the rhizomatic processes of economic development, political governance and cultural transition related to nature resource economies.

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