

In with the new: how technological advances affect minority languages

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Across indigenous minorities world-wide, the new ways of communication and communicative practices — including various social media platforms, mobile phones, and WhatsApp — are on the rise. A high uptake of social media platforms, especially Facebook, has been signalled for numerous indigenous groups across the loci of linguistic diversity, including Papua New Guinea, Amazonia, and also the First Nations of Australia. This is particularly so in the world impacted by Covid-19, with wide-spread limitations on face-to-face contact and travel.

New technological developments and new interaction patterns within virtual spaces have resulted in linguistic innovations. A typical consequence is an influx of loanwords from contact languages, especially English. Speakers of some minority languages, with a tendency to ensure they are not understood by their numerous and aggressive neighbours, have a different preference: existing terms for traditional practices, such as drum beats, get extended to cover notions such as phone credit and phone number.

What happens if speakers of a language with obligatory evidentiality (that is, grammaticalized information source) acquire access to new ways of knowing things, via phones and social media? The new practices help us understand just how pliable these systems are. People who use social media and phones on a day-to-day basis treat them on a par with face-to-face communication, using visual evidential. In contrast, older and more traditional speakers, for whom social media remain an exotic rarity, tend to use non-visual and reported forms to talk about information acquired with the new means.

The impending rise of new forms of communication sets apart speakers of different generations: younger people who are often less well-versed in traditional genres and ways of saying things than their parents and grandparents are likely to excel in the knowledge of modern technology and in discourse within social media. As

a consequence, we see the enhancement of transgenerational differences and speedy rise of transgenerational diversity of minority languages. New ways of saying things can be seen as an opportunity to enhance the vitality and the utility of minority languages in the new contexts, as many try and maintain their languages as 'in-group' communication devices within the vast web of social media platforms. Technological advances are responsible for rapid changes in the linguistic ecology, creating a further dimension for linguistic diversity and impacting the reflexive understanding of language and language use.