Commentary: Mediatized spaces for minoritized languages.
Challenges and opportunities

The mediatized spaces that have opened up as a result of the contemporary era of globalized digital media are evident in all three contributions to this section: Máiréad Moriarty highlights how Irish can become a resource in the repertoire of a comedian, who learned it as an adult, as well as a ‘rehabilitated’ identity resource for those who learned the language in school to various degrees of fluency; Ana Deumart’s case shows how the technoscape (Appadurai 1996) provides the tools for individuals to localize resources for themselves away from the restrictions of normative institutions; and Sari Pietikäinen’s rhizomatic analysis of spaces, both fixed and fluid, for mediatizing the Sámi languages, provides us with a way to analyse the complexities of new mediatized spaces for minority languages. All three contributions highlight the interdependencies between technology, agency, language practices and wider ideologies that are involved in the creation, maintenance and usage of mediatized spaces for minority languages. Performance is a keyword that permeates all of the contributions, and perhaps best illustrates the particular constellations of technology, agency, practice and ideology that we are currently experiencing.

The cases in this section can be seen to illustrate three eras or paradigms (cf. Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011) in the evolution of mediatized spaces for minority languages. In the first era, the gifting era (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011), scarce media resources and spaces are gifted by the centre (a national/regional authority) to peripheral/minoritised language communities. The state is the key agent and actor with the ultimate power. The speech community is perceived as demarcated, monolingual, internally unified; and language is conceived as an objective, isolated system with material properties which can be fixed, kept pure, maintained, etc. These are the ‘superfixed spaces’ which Sari Pietikäinen identifies in her contribution. Media communication is primarily monologic with authoritative, ideal speakers being heard. From the sociolinguists’ point of view also, media presence is seen as a guarantor of life and existence for the minority language (cf. Dorian 1991). Media presence guarantees credibility and existence and would automatically bring revitalization and revival, and the opinions of Máiréad Moriarty’s respondents certainly appear to bear out this contention.
In the next era, the ‘service’ era or paradigm (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011), simply being present is not enough; the drive is for ‘functional completeness’ (Moring 2007), to be all things to all speakers, even as fragmentation with media and within the speech community starts to occur. Media spaces are seen as a resource for corpus, status and acquisition planning, as Máiréad Moriarty points out in relation to the Irish language television station. Writing about Irish, Ó Laoire (2008) identifies this as the era of the ‘mega-policy’. In the Irish context, this was the time of the campaign for Irish-language television and launch of Teilifís na Gaeilge (although, as Máiréad Moriarty points out, its successor, its rebranding and relaunch as TG4 belongs much more to the current ‘performance’ era). Communication is still primarily monologic, although there is limited dialogic communication. Media actors – community-based organizations and channels – along with the state are the key agents.

In the gifting phase, the primary actor with the greatest agency is, not surprisingly, the state; in the service era, agency is extended to media professionals and associated companies; in the third era, the performance era, we can see the individual as the primary actor, in line with Friedman’s (2006) view of the individual’s role in globalization 3.0, as a result of digital technology. Whilst participation and practices change somewhat between the gifting and service eras, the performance era or paradigm, the predominant one in the current climate, represents a very significant change, not only in agency and technology, but also in terms of language practices and associated ideologies. Firstly, there is a challenge to territorially-defined speech and media communities with the emergence of speech and media communities based on linguistic competence and interest in a language or activity rather than location (e.g. isiXhosa speakers and learners online). This era both results from and in a general decline in the role of the professional linguist and media professional in favour of a gift economy model of media multilingualism and minority language media. For example, Facebook has used a crowd-sourcing model to localize for all languages other than English (Lenihan 2011). In this model, language communities are formed from the bottom-up by volunteers who put themselves forward as part of a translation community, with no verification of competence, qualifications etc. (cf. Ana Deumert’s discussion of Wikipedia). The Web is becoming a vast multilingual corpus created by users rather than by producers; it is a linguistic (and by extension a sociolinguistic) machine, fed by users: Google translate, for example, uses the linguistic choices and renderings of individuals on the Web to ‘feed’ Google Translation, rather than relying on a team of professionals to translate and localize content.

The second main feature is the evolution of the resource/performance paradigm in sociolinguistics (e.g. Pennycook 2010; Rampton 2006) in response to changing practices and participation in digital and social media. This paradigm
shift argues for a view of languages as resources which make up an individual’s repertoire, and thus can be used by speakers acting in an agentive way in performing identity work. A resource paradigm allows for the opening up and creation of ‘strategically hybrid spaces’ as Sari Pietikäinen terms them. Languages become ‘detached’ from their established geographical ‘habitat’, becoming ‘mobile’ resources in individual repertoires, as highlighted by Máiréad Moriarty and Sari Pietikäinen in their chapters. A ‘circulation perspective’, Sari Pietkiäinen tells us, provides a more appropriate insight into the everyday life of indigenous, minoritized languages, than, for example, a quantification or competence approach might. In all of the cases presented, we can see evidence of the valuing of play, humour and hybridity, as well as the recognition and exploitation of mixed, ‘truncated’ (Jacquemet 2005) repertoires, which were previously hidden and/or not deemed suitable for mediatization or commodification. This phenomenon is dependent on a language-ideological shift in relation to minority languages, whereby a previous ‘deficit’ model (Jaffe 2007), focussed on the decline of the language, the lack of competence, and disappearance of monolingual speakers has gradually given way to an ‘added value’ model in which a little bit of language is enough (Jaffe 2007) and even limited competence is to be celebrated alongside an acceptance of ‘imperfect’ bilingualism and language mixing. TV presenter Hector’s imperfect practices, described in Máiréad Moriarty’s chapter, exemplify this trend, and, as Ana Deumert shows, many contemporary practices on Web 2.0 defy categorization in terms of received norms about code-switching and mixing and the written-spoken dichotomy. Such spaces enable play with language as just one resource for various types of performance, for example, voicing the self in online interactions (Ana Deumert) and voicing/styling others in comedy sketches (Máiréad Moriarty and Sari Pietikäinen). Humour and play are a common thread in these cases and are something new in terms of mediatized spaces for minority languages. Certainly, humour and play were never part of the gifting or even the service eras, when the stakes were too high, the power too imbalanced, the need for homogeneity and an agreed narrative too urgent to risk humour and play.

Linked to a shift away from territorially-based speech communities, has been an increasing commodification in relation to minority languages in the media. Here we can see a move from a rights based model to a lifestyle/consumption based model – Ó Laoire (2008), for example, uses the term ‘speakers of choice’ to refer to the Irish context. Minority language media communities are self-selecting and characterized less by location than by competence, interest, a desire for self-actualization and performance, and political ideology – this being understood as a commitment to maintaining the minority language. Speakers are now also primarily consumers, and new technology makes it possible to serve their needs, since the Web breaks down the traditional economies of scale that favour...
publishing media in big languages. Speakers of Irish and other minority languages have become niche consumers in long tail markets (Anderson 2006), with a type of hyperlingualism developing in new media, as Ana Deumert’s contribution shows. There has also been a commodification of (some not all) minority languages and identities, which can add distinction (Bourdieu 1991), especially in an English-speaking context (Kelly-Holmes 2010). The emergence of the ‘Sexy Irish’ phenomenon, which has many parallels in similar context such as Welsh, can be seen to be part of this (Kelly-Holmes 2011). Globalized genres have become acceptable for minority language media, representing a move away from a cultural nationalist, Whorfian model; likewise, minority languages such as Irish and Sámi are now seen as fit for such genres, representing what Máiréad Moriarty and Sari Pietikäinen identify in their respective cases as a scalar shift for these languages. In addition, this shift from a concern with geographic fixity implies, as Sari Pietikäinen points out in her chapter, a shift in our understanding of mediatized spaces, from ones that are gifted and fixed to ones that are created as required and constantly reconfigured and renegotiated. In such a context, circulation becomes key and all three chapters are focussed in one way or another on tracing or mapping these circulations of language resources. We can also see in the three chapters how sociolinguistic change is both the driver and the product of these different types of circulations and the resulting creation of new mediatized spaces for minority languages.

These three eras or paradigms, while being chronological are also concurrent – this relates to Sari Pietikäinen’s argument about the heterotopic nature of mediatized spaces. Just because performance is now dominant does not mean that gifting and service paradigms cease to exist or do not form part of the current context – either synchronically or diachronically. This is why new mediatized spaces create particular challenges and also opportunities for minority languages, as all of the cases studied illustrate. Máiréad Moriarty argues strongly that globalization has not only been bad but also good for Irish, with the balance in the current phase coming down on the positive side. Likewise, Sari Pietikäinen shows how change can lead to improvement in the context of a minority language and its speakers. Ana Deumert’s chapter shows how the development of digital media and the participation possibilities afforded by Web 2.0 mean that languages and speech communities can skip the gifting and service eras and move straight to the performance era without having to rely on state or traditional media institutions and resources. All three contributions raise issues about participation and agency in this brave new era. While there is hybridity and fluidity, there is still a concern with quantification and demarcation, for example, in terms of measuring multilingualism on the Web. Such tensions and challenges highlight the importance of approaches such as that advocated by Sari Pietikäinen’s rhizomatic model, which
allow for the chronology and simultaneity of gifting, service, and performance paradigms to be uncovered in the new mediatized spaces.

References


