Mapping Intercultural Communication Imperatives of Police-Public Interactions in Rural Spaces

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Abstract

This research note seeks to generate fruitful pathways to advance a new discourse on intercultural encounters between the police and individuals from multilingual communities in Australia's increasingly diverse rural and regional settings. How might police officers better relate and communicate with groups of migrants whose language practices are complex, unpredictable and eschew the widely used logics of translation and interpretation? How might we encourage hope in our social communities that intercultural understanding between policing agencies and new migrants is key to co-creating peaceful and resilient rural communities? How might police communication protocols that assist in supporting the retention of migrants' linguistic capabilities and funds of knowledges contribute to the wellbeing of regional communities? What would policing rural and regional communities look like if we were to centre sociolinguistic and intercultural imperatives? In this research note, we consider these questions in our search for the next steps in mapping police communication protocols that work for all in Australia's rural and regional settings. The goal is to contribute new conceptual approaches we can use to foster partnerships and trusting relationships between the police and our increasingly diverse rural populations.

Keywords: intercultural communication; multilingual migrants; sociolinguistics of policing; police-public partnerships; rural policing; resilient rural communities

Sociolinguistic and intercultural communication dimensions of policing have so far not been theorised adequately enough to explain the effect of complex and nest-like patterning of linguistic usages by migrant individuals in rural and regional settings. And yet, previous sociolinguistics research has demonstrated the importance of language as a key determinant of success, survival and overall social wellbeing particularly in intercultural contact situations (Brown & Ganguly, 2003; Ndhlovu, 2019; Makoni, 2016; Kienscherf, 2012). These studies have found that in typical multilingual contexts, active participation in the community is dependent upon access to language varieties elevated to prestigious statuses of official and national languages. Language as a medium of interaction and access shapes intergroup relations and can determine people's fortunes. Language can determine who has access to schools, who has opportunities for economic advancement, who participates in political decisions, who has access to governmental services, and who gets treated fairly by governmental agencies. Language can also determine who gets ahead and who is left behind; it can affect the prospects for success – for ethnic groups and for individuals in these groups (Ndhlovu, 2020; Ndhlovu, 2015; Brown & Ganguly, 2003; Eades, 2013).

Language is the first point of contact in human social interaction. In the context of policing, there is always a language or a set of languages that mediates the dynamic of police-public interactions. Individuals that are proficient in specific types of linguistic resources, such as English in Australia, can have better acess to police services compared to migrant individuals who speak a host of other languages but have limited English language skills. It is, therefore, partly through language that injustices may go unnoticed as individuals can be treated fairly or unfairly by the justice system on account of their language profiles and abilities (Eades, 2008; 2013).

These sociolinguistics and intercultural approaches draw our attention to the following key questions: How are political and economic problems of inequality, exclusion and discrimination reflected in the complex relations between language and society? What is the role of language in facilitating/hindering access to services? How does real language of real people work in everyday real life? (Koerner, 1991; Spolsky, 2010; Ndhlovu, 2021). The implications of these questions have so far not been sufficiently emphasised, or are sometimes completely overlooked, in mainstream theoretical and methodological models of policing multilingual and multicultural communities.

As we show in sections to follow, previous theorisations that do not centre critical sociolinguistics approaches suffer from the limitation of focusing mainly on groups and communities (as opposed to individuals). This homogenising tendency fails to consider unique temporalities of individuals and how these bear onto communication processes with law enforcement agents. Through their nested language practices, individuals can develop a comfortable sense of identity and self-worth in their interactions with the police (Stephens, Hill & Greenberg, 2011).

Unlike in the past, many migrants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds are now moving beyond Australian gateway cities, such as Melbourne and Sydney, and

settling in small towns in rural and regional areas (Hugo et al., 2013; ABS, 2017). One-fifth of people who came to Australia between 2006 and 2011 settled in regional areas (Collins, 2019; Parliament of Australia, 2019). Individuals from such communities often speak 'bits and pieces' of different languages that reflect their complex mobilities and migration journeys that took them through several countries (Ndhlovu, 2017). These emerging trends in the settlement of new migrants mean that intercultural communication and cultural literacy skills must be at the heart of how to build a common life in increasingly diverse rural and regional Australian spaces. A 'whole-of-community approach' to resettlement – focusing on the needs of both new migrants and regional communities – has potential to build social cohesion and intercultural understanding (Watts et al., 2019). Police services are part of this whole-of-community approach, but they (and other public servants) tend to use opaque and specialised language when dealing with the public. Informal conversations with police commanders in rural and regional New South Wales suggest that local police officers also often face major language and intercultural communication challenges when interacting with multilingual migrants who speak limited English.

The task of mapping alternative approaches to police-public interactions in marginal rural spaces requires us to think outside the box. It calls our attention to reopening and answering anew those normative questions and assumptions about policing that seem to have been settled several decades ago. In addition to criminological and legal aspects, effective policing must also be about centring other dimensions of human sociality. This is especially germane in rural and regional settings that are increasingly becoming extremely diverse in all sorts of ways – culturally, linguistically, economically, ontologically, or otherwise. Language, communication and intercultural understanding are among key imperatives of human sociality that are currently least appreciated in mainstream discourses and praxes of policing. Yet, language and communication are at the heart of human social interaction.

Police-public interactions have been theorised and analysed extensively from criminological, sociological, psychological and legal perspectives (Trojanowicz, 1971; Walker & Kratcoski, 1985; Benedict et al., 2000; Prenzler & Porter, 2015). However, the dynamics of police interactions with individuals who speak multiple bits and pieces of languages, especially in rural and regional settings, remains fuzzy and least understood. As noted above, effective policing is not just about crime and the law. It is also about the social, relational, and cultural dimensions of living a good quality life in the community. It is, indeed, also about the ability by the police to nurture strong and trusting relationships with the diverse communities they serve. It entails building viable social networks as well as creating and sustaining common bonds with people within and across different communities.

Trust and inclusion are particularly relevant in the context of migrants where the historical experience of groups may have fostered a distrust with police or state authorities, which may be carried over to the Australian context (see Ali et al., 2021). Without attention to communication, these issues of trust may remain or may be exacerbated, bringing with it the risk that such groups will not report crime or their own victimisation, while simultaneously limiting opportunities for inclusion, engagement, and the development of

shared social bonds (see Shaw & McKay, 1969). With respect to social bonds, opportunities for inclusion, civic engagement and the development of social networks may also be under strain in a rural context where ethnic and cultural 'outsiders' may face greater social exclusion from pre-established and often long standing dense social networks, which may also often be culturally and ethnically homogenous (Barclay & Donnermeyer, 2007). Notably, the social exclusion of migrants from important social and civic arenas may have significant repercussions, including social and community attribution and blame for crime (see Mulrooney & Wise, 2019; Mulrooney & Wise, 2023), as well as their own engagement with criminal offending (Doucet & Lee, 2006).

All these dimensions of building shared civic communities implicate linguistic and intercultural imperatives in the sense that there is always a language or a set of languages that mediates these processes (Ndhlovu, 2015; 2019). Notwithstanding individual circumstances and experiences, people can have their interactions with the police enhanced or impeded by particular linguistic repertoires, language choices and usages. It is, therefore, important for us to theorise policing from a sociolinguistic perspective because language is the first point of contact in human social interaction. It is through language that police-public trust is manifested and enacted as people may feel included or excluded on account of their language profiles and abilities. It is partly through language that people often express their fears, their joys and sorrows, and their aspirations and subjective perceptions about satisfaction with life, or lack of it. Specific languages and language abilities mediate social networking, employment participation, and access to police services and other processes leading to better quality life in rural and regional spaces.

Why Rurality and Marginality Matter

The common view about migrants and rural communities is that they are marginal due to their geographical location away from metro cities. Rural communities are also perceived as being marginal by virtue of their small population sizes and a lack of access to adequate social services compared to their counterparts in metro cities. Marginality is, therefore, generally used to index zones and forms of exclusion, disadvantage, and vulnerability (Anderson & Larsen, 1998; Bodwin, 2001; Davis, 2003; Gurung & Kollmair, 2005). Such characterisation of rural communities is, indeed, plausible – but only to a degree.

In this research note, we adopt a more positive view of margins and marginality and consider them to be spheres of possibility, transformation and new beginnings (Seshadri-Crooks, 1969; Viljoen, 1998). Seen from this perspective, the margin is a privileged place for writing one's identity, history, cultural values, desires and fears, and not a space of victimhood and exclusion. We use this approach on marginality to read new meanings into multilingual migrants' rich repertoire of linguistic, cultural and other funds of knowledges.

Admittedly, multilingual migrants in Australia's rural and regional areas do exist on the fringes or periphery of the broader Australian society. However, such location of multilingual migrants in this seemingly powerless and negligible space does not necessarily

mean they are unimportant and, therefore, exposed to the whims of the centre, where categories of relevance are laid down, decreed and enacted (Ndhlovu, 2015). Rather, the margin that they occupy is a zone where categories and systems of relevance become deconstructed, where the power to control and dictate meaning becomes irrelevant, and where power is questioned and no longer applies automatically or self-evidently (Viljoen, 1998). This means the margin is a site for transformation, (re)creating, brainstorming, and charting the way forward.

In the words of Seshadri-Crooks (1969, p. 59) the margin is a space of agitation, subversion and theoretical innovation—the condition of possibility—the "unthought and unsaid that makes a positive knowing possible". Viljoen (1998) extends further the idea of the margin, noting that it contains the elements of the good life and is a site of freedom, fecundity, and a point from which the world can be surveyed intellectually. This means the margin is a privileged position; a space where new ideas are formed, trialled, and then disseminated. The question for us as social scientists is this: how might we leverage rural marginal communities' capabilities and funds of knowledges to enrich theories, discourses and praxes of police communication protocols?

Previous Theorisations – What the Literature Says

Previous Australian studies have reported major communication barriers between law enforcement agencies and Aboriginal second language speakers of English in formal courtroom procedures (Eades, 2013; 2010). However, very little is known – beyond impressionistic assumptions and anecdotal evidence – about the nature and extent of this problem in relation to communication between police officers and multilingual migrants in everyday interactions in rural and regional areas. International sociolinguistics research shows that instances of miscommunication associated with language barriers are often complicated by the fact that many limited English proficient persons fear the police and go to great lengths to avoid contact with public institutions (Shah et al., 2007; Makoni, 2016; Harkin, 2015; Kienscherf, 2012; and de Silva Joyce & Thomson, 2015). This is because of negative experiences in different overseas regimes; or due to lack of confidence that they will be understood.

Communication is also especially important when it entails lawful orders and a miscommunication or misunderstanding in certain scenarios may lead to serious harm. An inability to communicate proficiently in English in Australia likewise limits a person's ability to understand information or advice concerning legal rights, obligations, and consequences of certain actions, unless that information or advice is provided in their preferred language (Eades, 2013). Ethnographic sociolinguistic studies in rural and regional Australia show a significant increase in new waves of migrants with limited English language skills, but who speak several other languages (Ndhlovu, 2013; 2014b; 2015; 2017; Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2016; Willoughby, 2013). Individual community members self-report speaking 'bits and pieces' of different languages daily, reflecting their convoluted mobilities and migration journeys that took them through several countries (Ndhlovu, 2013; 2014).

Although there are numerous Australian and international studies on policing in the context of multilingualism (Shah et al., 2007; Makoni, 2016; Kienscherf, 2012; de Silva Joyce & Thomson, 2015), there is limited research with a specific focus on what local communities expect of the police in their interaction with them. The conceptual ideas we posit in this research note seek to point us in a direction that will mark a major advance in our knowledge of the language practices and expectations of multilingual migrants and how these can enrich the theory and praxis of police communication protocols in Australia and internationally. Most previous studies on the sociolinguistics of migration show police officers often rely on language access plans that draw on migrants' country of origin profiles (Makoni, 2016; Kienscherf, 2012). That is, police officers seek the services of interpreters and translators registered as having knowledge of the national language(s) of the country where the individual they want to speak with came from.

This widely used method of resolving language and communication barriers in policing is expensive, flawed and often untimely. Misleading and incorrect information can be the result of the complex nature of the linguistic repertoires and language practices of multilingual individuals. Multilingual migrants who speak bits and pieces of languages – all mixed up – acquired along migration and refugee journeys in transit countries present a unique set of intercultural communication challenges that defy the normative logics of translation and interpretation (Ndhlovu & Willoughby, 2018). Multilinguals are not necessarily or always speakers of clearly identifiable standard languages (Ndhlovu & Makalela, 2021). Such people might fall through the cracks within the public service provision system, as they are not fluent in those officially recognised migrant languages that have accredited interpreters in Australia.

Communication challenges arising from these complex language practices of multilingual migrants in small rural and regional towns have not been documented or published. Additionally, this is not only a problem of language, but one of meaning, context, culture, practice and so on, all of which shape verbal communication. For instance, while some for whom English is not a first language may come to learn to speak English fluently, they may still be missing important components of communication such as banter, slang, custom, historical context, and so on – or what the pioneering sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1974) called 'the ethnography of communication'. Insights from the ethnography of communication thesis are especially relevant with respect to law enforcement agencies who often use a specialised register or language of their own (Ndhlovu, 2014a).

Benefits of Centering Intercultural Imperatives

Some scholars have concluded that all human communication and social interaction is intercultural (Holliday, 1999; Kramsch & Boner, 2010). This is because linguistic and cultural diversity are the norm at the individual and societal levels. Individuals and communities of practice use different types of registers and repertoires depending on context, setting and the attributes of their interlocutors. So, at the end of it all, most people around the

world (let alone migrants and refugees) are culturally and linguistically diverse. This diversity reveals a complexity that cannot simply be remedied through the process of translating a word in one language to another. In his examination of the oversights caused by ethnocentric perspectives in comparative criminology, Nelken (2009) points out that the Dutch term 'gedogen' cannot be translated into English or any other language. Rather, he argues, that "the term is Dutch. The concept is Dutch, and its application only works in Holland" (p. 305). The closest English translation would be 'tolerance', but Nelken (2009, p. 305) suggests this is open to passivity whereas the Dutch concept "refers to an open-eyed tolerance – a matter of government policy".

This is also not simply an issue of the translation or lack thereof of particular words from one language to another, but also one of meaning which is itself coloured by culture. Again, drawing on the Dutch example, Nelken argues that policymakers in the Netherlands tend to look for pragmatic solutions to problems, which means to not be dogmatic. By contrast, the author suggests that in Italy the term pragmatic refers to actions that are not grounded in any guiding principles and, as such, risk being unprincipled. This, Nelken (2009, p. 292) says is not to suggest the Dutch are unprincipled and the Italians are not often pragmatic, but rather reveals "how difficult it can be for us to see the limits of our ways of seeing things".

Other scholars have gone as far as saying there is no such thing as a simple question in intercultural encounters (Beál, 1992). 'Simple' questions can lead to tensions and misunderstandings in the context of cross-cultural communication. What seem to be minor differences can have major consequences such as creating tension, frustration, misunderstanding and, ultimately, alienation and lack of cooperation. Negative stereotyping may then ensue when gaps exist between what the words say and what they actually mean. This is a significant point worthy of exploration in the context of police communication, because asking questions (the police interview) is one of the common ways by which the police gather information and evidence from members of the public. However, what police officers consider simple questions may, in fact, be interculturally loaded and complex questions.

Questioning is perceived and regarded differently across different cultural groups. As Piller (2017, p. 14) advises: "different cultures look at reality through different cultural grids". Among most Indigenous and Southern communities around the world, questions asked by persons in authority such as the police are often intimidating and not considered the best way to seek out information or establish productive rapport. Yet, the scripted or thematic interview is the predominant method the police use to collect information from members of the public they serve. The approach that relies heavily on questioning is limited in the sense that it overlooks culturally-specific meanings and understandings of the role of questions in everyday social interactions. In other words, the discursive strategy of asking questions is culturally relative. And yet, it is standard practice for the police to ask questions as they gather evidence and other information during the course of their normal duties.

In some cultures, however, not every question is an instrument of information gathering. Some questions do not even need to be answered, while some words have no meaningful translation or equivalents across languages and cultures. For example, English words that describe emotional states such as 'depression' are not easily translatable into most African cultures because equivalent words that describe such feelings simply do not exist in African languages (Piller, 2017). Instead, African cultures employ pragmatic strategies (other than words) to convey or communicate such emotional feelings as depression. Similarly, the Dutch word 'gezellig' has no meaningful translation into English as a descriptor of feelings or emotional wellbeing. These culturally relative differences in assumptions and perceptions about the role of questions in social interactions may present a conundrum in intercultural encounters between the police and linguistically and culturally diverse individuals. We posit here that skills in critical cultural literacy, intercultural competence and cultural awareness hold the key to resolving instances of misunderstanding and miscommunication that may arise.

Research projects that focus a laser light on the unique linguistic and cultural attributes of multilingual rural populations will lead to identifying a new discourse on police communication protocols that will help those who do not have adequate skills in English language or officially recognised migrant languages to access public services provided by law enforcement agencies. Communication in intercultural encounters must be about the development of common bonds based on a more universal conception of humankind in a new language of 'interdependency', 'interaction', 'interconnectedness', 'co-operation' and 'collaboration' (Cantle, 2012, p. 143). In the context of police-public interactions in rural and regional spaces, we need new paradigms to assist in improving intercultural understanding between police officers and multilingual migrants; and to help build stronger social relationships within the changing demographics.

There are numerable societal and academic benefits of research projects that integrate intercultural and linguistic perspectives in police communication discourse. First, such projects will encourage hope in our social communities that intercultural understanding between policing agencies and new migrants is important and that experiences and voices of marginal rural communities matter in shaping the direction of social policy. Second, the centring of linguistic and intercultural imperatives will assist in developing new police communication protocols to address misunderstandings between the police and regional communities. Addressing this will help strengthen police-community relations by enhancing police officers' ability to protect and serve through developing stronger and more trusting relationships with multilingual migrant communities. A third benefit is about supporting the retention of linguistic capabilities and cultural resources of multilingual migrants with significant impacts on the wellbeing of regional communities. With their focus on positively impacting and strengthening our communities, linguistic and intercultural approaches to policing will advance social cohesion. Language access plans that might come out of these new approaches will help better capture the communicative needs of local policing agencies and those of multilingual migrants. Additionally, the advanced sociolinguistics, criminological and intercultural communication knowledge base will contribute towards

building peaceful and resilient communities through fostering partnerships and trusting relationships between the police and the public – as equal partners in co-creating lasting solutions to the challenges of rurality and marginality.

There are at least two broad strategies for promoting effective communication in intercultural encounters such as those between the police and multilingual migrants. First, it is important to understand that people are subject to many influences, and this entails trying to look at your own 'culture' as an outsider to appreciate other people's cultural grids and ontologies. This is akin to what Homi K Bhabha (1994) characterises as finding the 'third space'. It is also equally important to recognise that communication is constructed 'in the moment' and 'on the move' – or what some scholars call the 'mobility paradigm' (Salazar, Elliot & Norum, 2017; Novoa, 2015; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Police-public interactions are often spontaneous and unplanned hence the need for critical cultural competency skills that allow for collaborative and productive communication that is free of prejudices and negative stereotyping.

A second strategy is about recognising that we are the product of our cultural upbringing, which leads us to communicate in particular ways. Cultural groups value different things highly and cultural groups may coincide with nationality, but not always. Therefore, the expectations we have about communication and behaviour are usually invisible. Both sides in intercultural encounters must try to understand how they appear to the other and why. Mismatched expectations can lead to frustration, miscommunication, stereotyping and racism. All of these may help avoid injustice and the unfair treatment of ethnic and linguistic minorities by the police.

Conclusion

In this research note, we have argued for broadening theoretical orientations to better capture the myriad ways in which multilingual individuals in rural and regional Australia experience interaction with the police. Multilingual people from diverse backgrounds use multiple social transactional tools in the form of varieties of English, cross-border languages, refugee journey languages, small ethnic languages, cultural practices and discursive practices. These language types constitute valuable social capital that can enrich police communication protocols in ways that would enhance healthy, fulfilling, and better-quality lives for rural and regional communities. Without necessarily attempting to make claims about exhausting an entire field of study, this research note is an invitation to relevant academic communities and practitioners to enter a dialogical conversation around the trialling of new theoretical insights that might help us push further the envelope on the discourse and praxis of police communication.

Overall, what we have suggested is that theories of police-public interaction should consider how communication operates in complex and unpredictable ways in different social geographies. The theoretical ideas that we have posited constitute a starting point for the next steps in charting alternative understandings of the role of local and trans-local discursive

practices in building strong support networks for migrants in rural and regional settings. The wider circle of social networks enabled by using multiple languages and language types holds the promise for reducing social isolation, and alienation and for enhancing multilingual migrants' positive perceptions of the police.

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