

Endangered languages, social subjects and mediatization: the case of *Wikitongues*

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Abstract

This paper discusses possible roles of media/midiatization in the face of processes of linguistic changes and/in endangered languages in contemporary society. It is grounded on a social and historical approach to language and it finds support in Bakhtinian propositions about discourse, subjects and chronotopes. It assumes a sociolinguistic perspective to the interface between linguistic landscape, digital media and discursive agency. The study adopts the digital ethnography as a methodological procedure that grants the investigation of human actions and interactions in digital contexts. In order to explore the target theme, it presents a brief analysis of the case of Wikitongues – a non-profit organization that offers several digital platforms/media for individuals to share, divulge and comment on endangered language and cultural diversity. The analysis suggests that, by resorting to free online digital spaces and their affordances, spontaneous and activist video communities were created, showing that mediatization processes supported by the internet might help promote language diversity, discursive agency and cultural awareness.

Keywords: mediatization; digital ethnography; digital landscape; subjects; discourse; agency.

1. Introduction

Language change is certainly neither new nor strange to those who have been working in the field of anthropological and linguistic studies. However, in face of a digitally mobilized society in which the boundaries between online and offline universes have been steadily blurred (Blommaert & May, 2019), there is still a pressing need for the study of the relations between media/mediatization and their relations to language changes.

It is also opportune to favor studies that try and go beyond pre-established notions such as the ones that only tackle “effects” and “influences” of digital media in language configurations (Androutsopoulos, 2014).

Having said that, this paper discusses possible roles of media and/or mediatization processes in the visibility of endangered language changes. Based on a recent preoccupation, exposed by several segments of contemporary society, concerning endangered languages, this study presents the case of *Wikitongues*¹,

¹ Available from: <https://wikitongues.org/about/>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

a non-profit organization that offers digital platforms as mediatic space-times for individuals and/or any endangered language-speaking communities to voice their own conflicts, perceptions and claims in relation to their own mother language changes. All in all, people who join the *Wikitongues* media want to keep some kind of register and/or advert endangered and/or already extinguished languages.

Methodological support is found in digital ethnography (Pink and all, 2016), and the discussion is grounded on literature review (Bakhtin, 1973, 1981, Shohamy & Waksman, 2009, Blommaert & May, 2019, Androutsopoulos, 2014 and Medina, 2006).

The discussion suggests that, by engaging in such mediatization processes concerning the need to voice narratives about endangered languages, contemporary subjects establish online “active responses” (Bakhtin, 1981) to (other) socially and historically constructed discourses/acts that come from the offline universe, thus exercising discursive agency whilst taking part in language video communities set in the cyberspace.

2. Literature review

Language is a social practice, a dialogic construction materialized in discursive communication (Bakhtin, 1981). Dialoguing, humans create themselves, learn new things, share previous constructed knowledge and represent their views of the world. Discursive communication is always established in and referent to specific times and spaces in which social and historical conditions and events are both affected by as well affect the language-in-action. Bakhtin (1973, p. 201) explains that, by observing discursive communications, one may notice that the subjects involved in the “act” “[...] find one’s voice [and] orient it among other voices, to combine it with some of them and to counterpose it to others, or to separate one’s voice from another voice, with which it is inseparably merged”. Thus, while language emerges from dialogued discursive communications, in everyday social practices, it is both created and modified by the language speakers who, simultaneously, are also affected by it. As Bostad (2004) acknowledges, those “communications” are not merely an exchange of words, as they evoke and construct discourses. Moreover, according to Bakhtin (*apud* Bostad, 2004, p. 169), discourse is “[...] language in its concrete living totality”.

Any dialogic discourse, *i.e.*; one in which there is addressivity and responsivity between past, present and future discourses, everything is uttered within a time-space situated context. The Bakhtinian perspective informs that time and space are inseparable elements of life, to which Bakhtin refers as chronotopes (Bostad, 2004, p. 172).

Utterances, addressed and/or responded by interlocutors within discursive communications, are therefore constructed within chronotopes – which are defined as intrinsically temporal and spatial relations, a metaphor connected to the concepts of meeting, distance and proximity, belonging to all sorts of cultural contexts. Language interaction between social subjects is, therefore, an act of speech which mobilizes discursive agency in specific chronotopes.

Medina (2006, p. 141), explains that “[o]ur discursive agency should be conceived first and foremost as a process of negotiation. When we speak we are implicitly negotiating legacies of use with our interlocutors as well as with possible communication partners from the past and from the future”.

But what happens to a society (and its cultures) when the language code, the underlying structure of signs which are mutually shared and negotiated by a certain community of speakers (Bakhtin, 1981) gets endangered? What are implications of less and less people resorting to a particular language-code and its specifics? If humans constitute themselves and find ways out of their “unfinalizeability” (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 53) by dialoguing, what are the implicit effects of no longer being able to find someone else to engage in a dialogue within such language code boundaries and specifics?

That seems to be the case of several endangered (minority) languages which, due to sociolinguistic changes, face eminent death. Androutsopoulos (2014, p. 2) informs that sociolinguistic changes, apart from language death and loss, and other aspects related to variables, might refer to several different processes, namely “[...] linguistic obsolescence, minority language revitalization, pidginization and creolization”, amongst others. Additionally, according to Androutsopoulos (2014, p. 6), the study of sociolinguistic change in the present days has been also driven to the examination of linguistic innovations as well as discourse circulation in mediatized social environments.

The investigation of language relations in mediatized contexts might allow one to observe how, when and why endangered languages have been occupying mediated spots in the cyberspace, thus performing social acts.

Subjects who seek dialogue in discursive interactions engage on social actions. Proposing an accurate view of the concept within the research field of Linguistic Landscape, Blommaert and May (2019, pp. 1-2) suggest that “social action” needs to be redefined in terms of the “*locus*” of the action as well as who is interacting within it. Therefore, resorting to Rawls (2002, p. 60), Blommaert and May (2019, p. 4) quote: “[a] population is constituted not by a set of individuals with something in common but by a set of practices common to particular situations or events”. The authors also reinforce that, due to the digital immersion most societies have been through, in order to exam linguistic landscapes, sociolinguistic changes and, therefore, social actions (i.e.; where they happen, who is involved in them and what they imply), it is paramount to address that offline areas, and communities (and therefore, their languages) are now somehow inextricably connected to digital culture.

Applying to the ideas proposed by Shohamy & Waksman (2009), this study accepts that discourse materializations, in all sorts of texts (oral, visual, written and/or multimodal texts), that are contrued and/or shared in public landscapes (either be it urban public walls or the public digital “chronotopes” in the cyberspace), are “[...] embedded in history, culture, ideology” (Shohamy & Waksman, 2009, p. 314).

Overlapping private and public affairs, the cyberspace poses a challenge to those engrossed in studying social changes by the means of investigating linguistic landscapes, which certainly includes, though is not limited to, the understanding of the mediatization processes in which subjects submerge/emerge from in the current days. Offering a large repertoire of text varieties, modes and types, the digital arena, situated within the domains of internet, caters for socialinguistic inquires and expands the means by which societies, subjects and their discourses might be better known and represented nowadays.

Therefore, bearing in mind those theoretical appreciations, the inquiry presented in this paper resorts to a methodological approach that contemplates the investigation of social actions in the cyberspace.

3. Methodology and Results

In order to study social actions by examining language, discursive agency and the engagement in digital and mediatic communities, digital ethnography has been mobilized. According to Pink et al. (2016), ethnography is a broad term that encompasses research practices that are usually linked to various theoretical paradigms and, as a consequence, it has been defined in several different ways. The authors suggest that it is an inductive kind of research in which the investigation design change and evolve throughout the study development (Pink et al, 2016, n/p). It is set within the field of qualitative research, and it is usually driven to examine human actions and look into productions in digital environments. These might involve, but not only, issues related to: social media interactions, digital and technological affordances; digital resources and social inequities; digital spaces and discourses; sociocultural manifestations in digitally oriented environments, and so forth.

According to Pink et al. (2016, n/p), to perform a digital ethnography-oriented research entails adopting five main principles: multiplicity, “non-digital-centric-ness”, openness, reflexivity and unorthodox. Multiplicity refers to the idea of multiple ways of performing this type of research, which is usually instructed by the theoretical(s) framework(s) in which the investigation is grounded. It also means that there is an interdependent type of relation amongst digital technologies, media and the people involved in it (what they do/can do with the media, what is made of them and what it all might represent, from a critical perspective, for instance).

De-centralizing media, under this orientation, means that the social actions and subjects involved in the investigation are not seen separately.

Moreover, digital ethnography is seen as an “open event” (Pink et al, 2016), which means that the researchers accept that this methodology is open to other influences. It is also a reflexive practice, as it is understood that a digital ethnographer produces knowledge as he/she encounters with others. It is drawn by rather ethical and collaborative ways of performing research.

Finally, Pink et al. (2016) point that digital ethnography requires that researchers keep an open mind, meanwhile being attentive to non-mainstream, alternative ways of establishing communication in the present days.

Therefore, supported by digital ethnography, as it is presented by the aforementioned bibliographic reference, an investigation has been performed in the cyberspace, aiming to better understand contemporary relations established by social subjects, digital media and languages.

The object chosen to be focused on in this paper is the case of *Wikitongues*, which has been found as part of the data of a *Google* search “dying languages”, that yielded about 61,900,000 results (including repetitions), performed early in July, 2019.

The *Wikitongues* organization was reached after following the hyperlink presented within an article retrieved from: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2018/04/saving-dying-disappearing-languages-wikitongues-culture/>, which discusses *Wikitongues*'s efforts to join the race to save several languages that keep on disappearing, all over the world, at the rate of one language dying every two weeks. After exploring the article, the *Wikitongues* site was visited (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Wikitongues.

Screenshot of the initial WEB page of the non-profit organization. Retrieved from <https://wikitongues.org>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

The following section presents a discussion of the targeted object in the light of the theoretical perspectives broached in the literature review.

4. Discussion

The *Wikitongues* WEB page (partially represented by the screenshot portrayed by Fig. 1) informs that “[a]t the turn of the twenty-first century, as many as half of all languages were in danger of disappearing, a canary in the coal mine of humanity”. It also states that the non-profit organization was created to build a network of language speakers who are bound to participate in a worldwide movement to save endangered languages.

In addition, the representatives of the non-profit organization explain that their networking efforts have already mobilized people from more than seventy countries and, although it might “take time to save a language”, their activism seems to have been kept on motion due to volunteering and donations.

The *Wikitongues* main page also presents the readers with hyperlinks to other digital media in which the organization create networking time-spaces for those who are interested in their activist movement: *Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram*². This reinforces the idea that the relations between mediatization and language is not only one of “effect” and “influences” on style configurations, as affirmed by Androutsopoulos, 2014. Much on the contrary, it is clear to notice that Wikitongues resorts to digital media to foster opportunities for raising global awareness to an *offline* universe problem at hand, by the means of internet (online universe), thus establishing the dialogue between both worlds, as informed by Blommaert & May (2019).

At the same time, the activist organization WEB site provides the speaker of any endangered, dying or dead language with opportunities to “find their voices amongst others”, as suggested by Bakhtin (1973). It invites anyone to freely and willingly upload videos produced by themselves, in which they pose their personal endangered language narratives (Fig. 3).

² Available at: <https://wikitongues.org/>. Access on: Aug 08, 2019.

In the section named “language seedbank” (Fig. 2), speakers of any languages (usually minority or, as the organization page states, “marginalized” ones) are allowed to join the initiative.

The screenshot portrayed by Fig. 2, reads: “all initiatives to sustain marginalized languages have one thing in common: media, so their language can be shared and taught”. This utterance characterizes a responsive act (Bakhtin, 1981) to other (past) uttered discourses (the “all initiatives”). It also exemplifies the dialogic nature of discursive communications, informing the addressee (subjects that wish to join the endangered languages network squad) that he/she is expected to engage in a dialogue, what can be done by clicking on the link “add a language”. Thus, the digital media (internet platform / site; digital video, etc.) become part of a process in which subjects engage, mediatizing their discourses and interacting with other social subjects alike by contributing with the video archives the organization claims to be “collecting”.

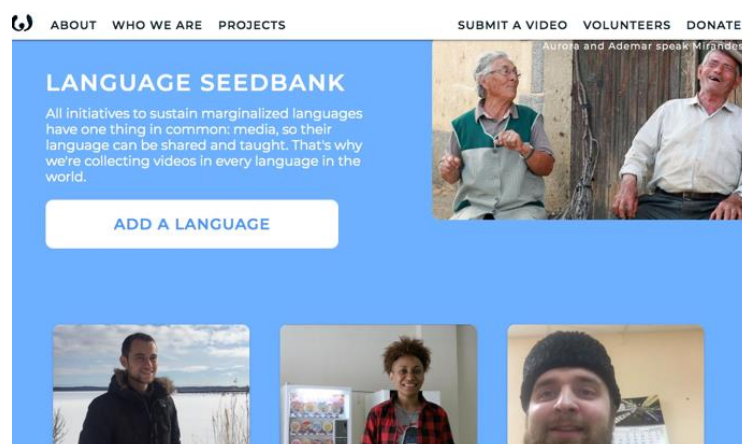


Figure 2. Wikitongues seedbank.

Screenshot of the WEB page. Retrieved from <https://wikitongues.org>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

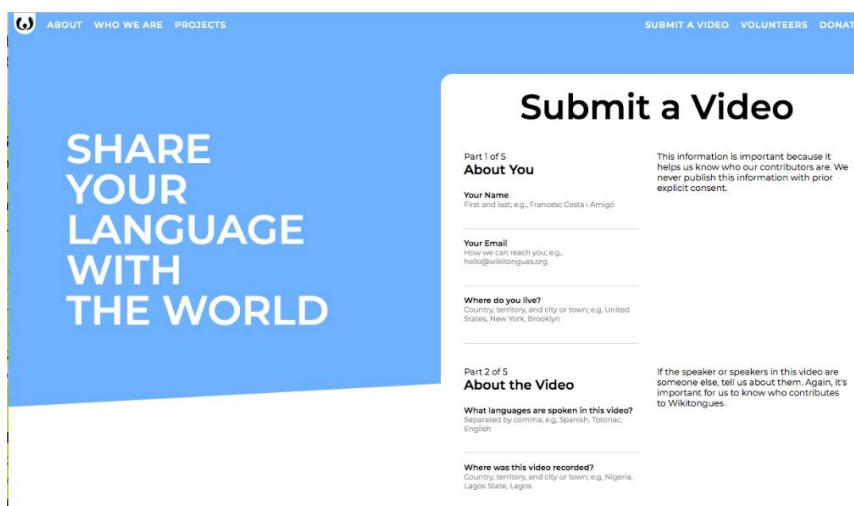


Figure 3. Invitation for speakers to contribute.

Screenshot of the WEB page. Retrieved from: <https://wikitongues.org/submit-a-video/>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

Figure 3 illustrates a screenshot that converges toward the assumption that the different digital media at hand are seen as viable means for subjects to exercise their “discursive agency” (Medina, 2006).

When joining in the *Wikitongues* network, by sharing videos and personal narratives, subjects find themselves a chronotope (Bostad, 2004) in which social action (Blommaert and May, 2019) is in-motion.

In addition, when someone uploads their videos, they register the responsive and responsible act (Bakhtin, 1973) of speakers who are interested in participating in “the race to save” endangered languages.

That act, which has the digital arena as *locus*, solidifies that contemporary subjects have a wish to mediatize their discourses, so that they make it possible for other interlocutors – who choose to dialogue with their shared videos, throughout the domains of the internet – to engage in “a set of practices common to particular situations or events” (Blommaert & May, 2019).

Figure 4 portrays a screenshot collected from the *YouTube*³ page, hyperlinked from the *Wikitongues* site initial page, that holds the channel in which videos uploaded from several speakers of endangered, dying or dead languages, from all over the world, are archived, identified and shared.

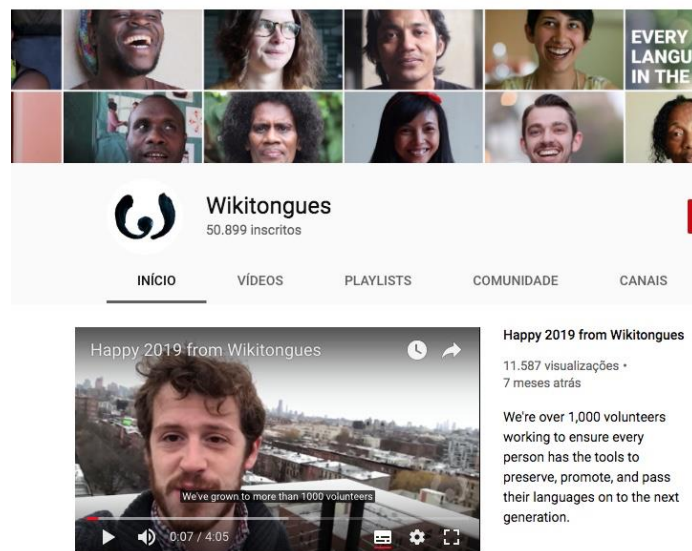


Figure 4. Wikitongues video channel.

Screenshot retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/wikitongues>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

The channel administrators inform⁴ that, when interacting with the posted videos, “constructive comments only” are accepted, showing there is a moderation of sorts that is meant to maintain the positive tone that the activist network aims to create. This establishes boundaries to the mediatized discourses expected by the enunciator of the utterance (the *Wikitongues* page administrators), placing the addressee within a set chronotope (Bakhtin, 1973; 1981; Bostad, 2004). The uttered “comments policy” goes further to state that “[...] Wikitongues is a community for cultural exchange and mutual respect”⁵. The statement

³ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/wikitongues>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

⁴ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WikiTongues/about>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

⁵ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WikiTongues/about>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

reinforces the concept of language as a form of “cultural exchange”, justifying the efforts to establish and maintain a race to save those particular languages at risk and/or to keep some sort of registration of the already dead ones.

The power and scope of mediatized discourses that, in this case, favor the perception of language as a means to construct, represent and share cultures and preserve/construe social identities, is confirmed by the number of views registered in the channel page: 11,512,019 views (Fig. 5).

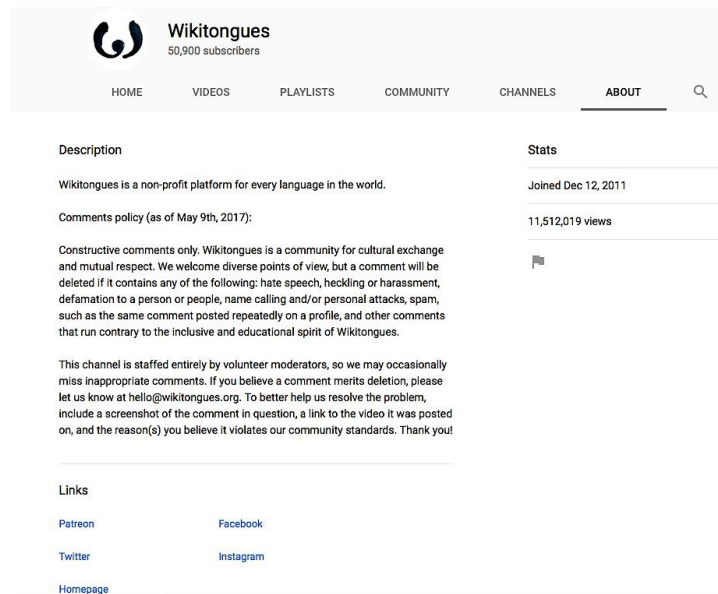


Figure 5. Wikitongues video channel information page.

Screenshot retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/wikitongues>. Access on Aug 08, 2019.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, possible relations among social subjects, endangered languages and mediatization were investigated with a study developed with the help of digital ethnography.

The cyberspace has been adopted as a public arena in which subjects establish discursive communication whilst interacting with and through digital media. It is an investigation context in which contemporary chronotopes present subjects with a locus for social action.

In order to pursue the study objectives, a research was performed and the *Wikitongues* non-profit organization digital media was brought to the center of the discussion, in the light of social-historic view of languages, grounded on Bakhtinian discussions, sided by sociolinguistic approaches to language changes, media and cultural practices.

The results suggest that, by engaging in discursive communication mediated by digital resources and spaces, contemporary subjects find ways to voice themselves, exercise discursive agency and establish dialogic interactions with others. It also demonstrates that language is intrinsically related to cultural representations and identity construction. The subjects who resort to digitally mediated chronotopes such as *Wikitongues* as a means to keep their particular language-code and its specifics somehow alive,

corroborate the assumption that humans constitute themselves and find ways out of their “unfinalizeability” (Bakhtin, 1973, p. 53) by participating in dialogic discursive interactions.

Making use of the affordances which characterize digital media and cyberspace, such as online interaction, participation and community construction, social mediatized subjects have proved that, when it comes to language and media relations, there are more than just linguistic modifications and renewed modes of constructing meaning involved.

The discussion of the object focused by this study has showed that, given the chance and with a certain amount of will, digital media might become resourceful and powerful means to stimulate socially relevant dialogues concerning the past, present and (a possible) future for languages, communities and their cultures. Hopefully, it may even help human beings renew a sense of perpetual humanity – which seems to have somehow been fading away from some of the members of the contemporary digitalized society.

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