

Distributed Cognition in the context of language shift in Eastern Indonesia

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In this study, a domain of contested cultural knowledge and authority is accessed through contested grammatical forms. Grammatical knowledge is an example of distributed cognition, in which cognitive phenomena are distributed among individuals and interaction becomes a crucial analytical element. This is especially pronounced during language shift, where receding knowledge of the indigenous language is differentially retained and where there is rapid emergence of new grammatical forms.

Allang village on Ambon island, Maluku, Eastern Indonesia, is presently experiencing the culmination of a century-long process of shift from the regional language, Allang, to dominant varieties of Malay/Indonesian, with a concomitant cultural re-orientation. I analyse an audio recording of an interaction in which two elderly holders of cultural tradition work with each other, and with me as documenting linguist, to produce a text presenting the history of the community in the Allang language. I look at the diverse grammatical constructions produced by the two speakers, including possessives, clauses structure, clause combining and discourse structure. Some of these structures reference older forms in the language while others are forms emerging in the context of language and cultural shift. I show how negotiation between these two community elders over grammatical forms run parallel to and interact with negotiations which assert, contest and establish their identities and relative status as holders of local cultural knowledge.

As linguistic knowledge recedes and individual shares in that knowledge become more disparate, there is potential for grammatical conflict. In the Allang interaction analysed here, what we see instead is work towards grammatical collaboration, grounded in a local cultural discourse which explicitly values presentation of self as the contributor of one's unique expertise to the larger whole. Grammar is one component in a range of interlocking social and cognitive expertises that are distributed through members of the community. Emergent grammar is contestable and becomes part of the work of (re)claiming social and cultural identity.