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Preface

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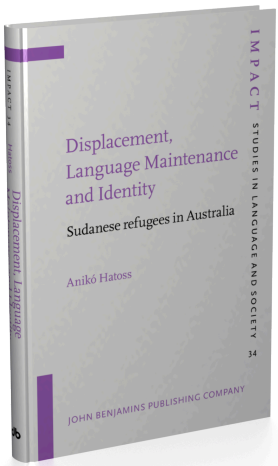

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Preface

This study grew out of an ethnographic project in South-East Queensland with the aim to explore the motivational dimensions of mother tongue maintenance in the Sudanese community of South East Queensland. Soon after the project commenced, I faced the first challenge as some of the operational concepts such as "ethnicity", "mother tongue", "language maintenance" and "identity", to name a few, were not an easy fit to this complex sociolinguistic context. For example, the assumption that "mother tongue" referred to African local languages quickly proved wrong, as some participants spoke Arabic as their first language[1]. Others learnt two or three languages from birth; therefore, these seemingly "neat" concepts had to be contested.

On the outset, I need to clarify the terms I use to refer to the community in question. In line with well-established sociolinguistic research, I use the term speech community as opposed to language community, as it refers to a group of people who interact through a language or a range of languages, rather than a group defined on the basis of their common first language (Wardaugh, 2006). I also use the concept of discursive community, as my interest is in the everyday lines of communication and the patterns of discourse that shape their everyday living. Since discourse is a social practice (Fairclough, 1992), discursive communities can also be conceptualized as "communities of practice". This concept was first used in the context of learning (see Eckert & Wenger, 2005), but it is useful in sociolinguistics, as it is "a good locus for studying how power is organized and exercised in day-to-day linguistic practice" (Eckert & Wenger, 2005, p. 582). This concept allows sociolinguists to focus on the dynamic actions of a speech community, including linguistic, social, discursive and identity-related, rather than describing them through static and abstract categories, such as gender, age, ethnicity and others (Holmes, 2008, p. 199).

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1. In this monograph I use the term African languages to refer to the local ethnic vernaculars such as Dinka, Nuer, Acholi, etc. as these languages have all been classified as Nilo-Saharan languages whereas Arabic has been classified as an Afro-Asiatic language. The Nilo-Saharan family is to be found exclusively in Africa and in a large part in Sudan. The term African vernaculars is used by some researchers, but this term can be confusing in the Sudanese context, as Sudanese Arabic is also an African vernacular, and secondly because the term "vernacular" to some suggests a kind of "under language". It is also important to understand that the classifications of African/non-African languages are largely ideological and do not necessarily reflect the local reality (personal Communication with Catherine Miller).

The speech community I am presenting in this volume also posed a challenge, as it used a complex set of codes in their everyday lives. Terms such as "language" and "dialect" soon surfaced as problematic, as respondents often had a different view as to the status of their dialect or language. Applying generic "language labels", such as "Arabic", were troublesome as the community's speech repertoire included a whole range of "Arabic" dialects. These observations were a reminder to drop "a number of ideological postulates that have been dominating not only the Sudanese political life, but also a large part of the international research on language and identity" (Miller, 2006, p. 8).

The second major challenge came from the community's refugee status and journey of displacement. While in language maintenance and shift studies it is customary to use "family" as a unit of analysis, it was difficult to define what "family" means in this community, and whether to design the survey for households, nuclear family or extended family units. On the one hand, families were fragmented due to the civil war, and guardians represented the "parents". On the other hand, it was typical to have cousins and extended family members living in the same household. In addition, identifying "Sudanese" respondents by the "country of birth" being Sudan was fraught with problems, as in many cases people were born during transition in refugee camps in Africa and they would have never seen their "home country" or have had little or nothing to do with its culture.

Also, while at the time of data collection Sudan and South Sudan were one country, in 2011 South Sudan gained independence. Sudan, in most of the discussion that follows refers to the old Sudan including the Arabic North and the largely Christian South.

Some children were separated from their family at an early age, and learnt their first language from an auntie or a guardian rather than their biological mother. Some other children who grew up in Sudan were exposed to a range of local languages and sometimes they acquired two or more languages from birth. In addition, they used various forms of Arabic which were also used for inter-ethnic communication. The concept of "language maintenance" was also difficult to apply to the whole community, as some of the community members did not learn any of their local African language in Africa. For them, "language maintenance" meant learning their heritage language anew. Others were conversant in their African community language, but lacked literacy skills.

In summary, the community in question was characterised by complex sociolinguistic features. The community was neither homogeneous nor static, but multifaceted and dynamic. It was a community in transition, which means that their past, present and future had to be included in the study. On the one hand, these three stages of their lives, whether lived, imagined or real, were shaped by their linguistic resources. On the other hand, their linguistic resources were also shaped by the "spaces" of their past and present experiences and their future aspirations. Therefore, the study took a multiperspectival approach paying attention to past, present and future.