Multilingualism and Translanguaging on Nordic Twitter:
A report on current and future work

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Since the turn of the millennium, social and digital media have become increasingly central spaces of human interaction and identity construction (Lam 2004, Androutsopoulos 2015, Schreiber 2015). On many popular platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, it has become commonplace for participants to engage in multilingual practices, fluidly switching between codes depending on the message and intended audience. Rather than merely reflecting real-world language use, for many people these virtual environments increasingly serve as primary spaces of foreign language use. Unhindered by the teachers and editors, people from all walks of life engage in linguistic experimentation and innovation, often using written global Internet English and a mixture of their other linguistic resources. These new practices, which range from multilingual to translilngual to transsemiotic, can often defy conventional models of regional and language-specific distributions, and also raise questions concerning the teaching and learning of ‘foreign’ languages in the digital age.

For linguists, digital media afford unprecedented access to high volumes of authentic and unedited data (Mocanu et al. 2013, Coates 2016, Yuan et al. 2016, Grieve et al. 2017, Coates 2018). In this presentation, I will discuss multilingualism and the use of translanguaging strategies in Nordic tweeting using the geospatial linguistic data collected over the last two years by the Nordic Tweet Stream (NTS) project (Laitinen et al 2017a & 2017b). I will introduce the background, methods and current resources of the NTS project, and then proceed to discuss the central role of English in the Nordic twittersphere, both as an emerging language and as a high-frequency source language for pragmatically motivated code-switching (Tyrkkö 2018). Making a distinction between multilingualism and translanguaging (Canagarajah 2011, Li 2016 and 2018), I will use frequency and distribution data, as well as illustrative examples, to demonstrate how social media data reveal that at least in the Nordic countries, English is a readily available linguistic resource that is assumed to be accessible to interactants and that can be used creatively in a “ludic” fashion (Crystal 2011). At the same time, however, Nordic multilingualism involving English is often prefabricated and derivative, suggesting that the desire to use English is not merely communicative, but also a means of establishing cultural common ground and of indexing the participant’s belonging to a multilingual community of netizens.

References


Mocanu, Delia, Andrea Baronchelli, Nicola Perra, Bruno Goncalves, Qian Zhang and Alessandro Vespignani. 2013. The Twitter of Babel: Mapping World Languages through Microblogging Platforms. PLOS ONE. April 2013, Volume 8, Issue 4. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0061981
