Disentangling multilingual and multicultural politeness norms in Namibian English

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In our talk, we will present findings from a research project which explicitly set out to investigate pragmatics in the multilingual and multicultural ecology of Namibia, a post-colonial African country where numerous ethnic and linguistic groups interact via the nation's sole official language English. Given that English is a non-primary colonial language in Namibia and has almost no L1 speakers, pragmatic variation in English between speakers of different L1s and pragmatic transfer from these languages into Namibian English (NamE) were focal points of the project.

However, results from the quantitative analysis of Discourse Completion Task data for four different speech acts showed that at the level of speech act realisation, speakers' L1 background hardly plays a role, suggesting the existence of a fairly homogenous set of pragmatic norms for communicating in NamE. L1 interaction with pragmatic decision making could be demonstrated only for specific cases (e.g. the two dominant strategies for RESPONSES TO THANKS), but turned out to be an insignificant factor in most other cases. The analysis of qualitative interviews with members of the same community of practice, however, showed evidence for diverging cultural models and politeness norms in L1 cultures and corresponding communicative settings. Although NamE users are evidently aware of these differences, they do not surface at the production level in NamE, but speakers do adjust their expectations of interlocutors' communicative behaviour and preferences.

Hence, the multilingual ecology of Namibia apparently has a strong influence on individual's concepts of politeness, but at the same time NamE opens up a shared linguistic space that allows for successful and virtually frictionless communication between linguistically and culturally distinct groups. In our presentation, we will delineate these two levels based on findings from quantitative speech act analysis and qualitative interview data.