

Music on the Move



An important element of language relates to its aesthetic use, in other words, how we make our lives beautiful and present ourselves to the world beautifully through language. Anthropologists and linguists have been interested in this dimension throughout the 20th century in their study of ritual and folklore and the ways that language is used in them through song, chant, oratory and other kinds of interactional discourse. [Bauman's \(1975\) *Verbal Art as Performance*](#) crystallised many of these ideas to place an emphasis on performance when looking at such aesthetic modes of communication and to establish performance as an important area of study within Sociolinguistics and Anthropological Linguistics. Singing is an important cultural activity in which language as performance intertwines with music. As with many other forms of performance, singing often takes place within the context of a range of other embodied cultural practices.

In my Linguistics PhD thesis supervised by [Dr. Verna Rieschild](#) at Macquarie University, I looked at two singing traditions – Irish traditional singing and South Indian Carnatic singing – as practiced in diasporic communities in Australia focusing on performance, language choice and language ideologies and musicolinguistic artistry. My thesis research provided a fascinating opportunity to apply the ideas from the study of language as performance to forms of singing I loved, and explore dimensions of multilingualism, globalisation and migration within them.

In singing, highly marked language choices can be made such as using a language you don't know or normally speak, or using a non-dominant language in a dominant setting. The transformative nature of the performance enables a transformation of settings and communicative practices. Hence, Irish traditional singers in Australia who speak Irish let their use of Irish in songs spill over into the informal speech or banter between the songs. Tamil-speaking Carnatic singers choose a song in Tamil (from the multilingual song repertoire) to elaborate with extended musicolinguistic improvisation.

Language ideologies, equally prevalent in singing as they are in speech, are particularly strong and transformative due to the expressive and heightened nature of performance. In Carnatic singing, an ideology of devotion to the Tamil language has competed with ideologies about music as a “universal language”- in other words, beyond any particular spoken language- throughout the 20th century (Ramaswamy 1997; Weidman

2005). Hence, the multilingual repertoire and centrality of songs in Telugu and Sanskrit has remained along with recognition of Tamil and singers consciously or unconsciously vary (typically in small degrees) as to how they weight each language in terms of the number of songs in each language and how this correlates with the types of songs chosen (some Carnatic songs are considered to be more musically “heavy” and consequently more at the core of the repertoire). Meanwhile, Irish traditional singing is connected with ideologies relating to Irish language use which have arisen in the course of its revival and resistance to the hegemonic influence of English.

Perhaps the most “moving” aspect of singing, however, is the way that music and language artfully intersect in performance, which I call musicolinguistic artistry. In the final part of my thesis, I analysed the musicolinguistic artistry of both singing traditions. In Irish traditional singing, one aspect of musicolinguistic artistry is the ways that singers perform different versions of the same song with slight differences in melody, rhythm, text or performance practice. Singers typically maintain aspects of the particular version they acquired but usually put their own individual stamp on it through acceptable variations in the song text (O Laoire 2004), innovative performance practices such as harmony or framing the song in a particular way through banter.

In South Indian Carnatic singing, musicolinguistic artistry is at its zenith in the improvisatory format known as *niraval* (literally “filling up”) in which a line from a song is repeated in various melodic and rhythmic combinations over the continuing steady beat cycle of the song. In *niraval*, the singer first uses the musical elements to emphasise particularly meaningful phrases in the song text and then gradually develops the melody and rhythm to increasing virtuosity to the extent that the line of text becomes more of a vehicle for the music (Radhakrishnan 2012).

The diasporic context adds the further dimension of migration and transnational movement. In the Australia-based communities of practice engaged in Irish traditional singing and South Indian Carnatic music, the singing traditions are transplanted from their territorial origins, evoking a strong sense of connection to those cultural homelands and triggering or providing a space for other embodied cultural and linguistic practices which accompany the singing traditions (cf. Ram 2000; Dutkova-Cope 2000). Performance events of these singing traditions hence create micro-level ecologies in which practices of cultural continuity and language maintenance and revitalisation can unfold in ways that are meaningful and beautiful. Practices of transmission of these traditions and transnationalism (e.g. singers or other community members traveling “back” to Ireland or South India for learning, performing or attending performances) add another layer which further strengthens continuity.

Looking at these two singing traditions in my thesis, I have realised that performance animates and “moves” language in a number of ways, particularly when what is being performed is language itself. Hence singing and other forms of performed discourse could be seen as another kind of “language on the move”, encompassing the range of communicative functions and social practices reflected in everyday speech but also transcending them into an aesthetic experience. When the language being moved through performance moves globally through migration and transnational practice, the shifts created are strong and encouraging for linguistic diversity in a multicultural world.



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