

Book Review: Piller, Ingrid, Donna Butorac, Emily Farrell, Loy Lising, Shiva Motaghi-Tabari, and Vera Williams Tetteh. *Life in a New Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024. xxii + 194 pp. Paperback, US \$29.95; Hardcover, US \$99.00

Life in a New Language is a collaborative ethnographic study exploring the lived experiences of adult migrants to Australia as they learn and navigate English in real-world contexts. Written by a diverse team of six linguists and educators—each with professional expertise in applied linguistics, TESOL, and migration studies—the book draws on nearly two decades of qualitative research, offering a rich and multifaceted examination of how language shapes migrant integration, identity, and opportunity. The authors’ collective backgrounds and intercultural perspectives position them uniquely to address the complexities of linguistic adaptation in a multicultural but English-dominant society.

The book’s scope is ambitious. Across eight substantive chapters, the authors document the challenges of “doing things with words” in a new language, from ordering a drink to seeking healthcare, finding employment, and raising children. Early chapters focus on the “arrival shock” many migrants experience when their pre-migration English proves insufficient for the sociolinguistic realities of Australia (p.1). Later chapters examine workplace communication, discrimination, family language choices, and the process of self-reconstruction in a new linguistic and cultural environment. The final chapter calls for more inclusive communication practices and policy reforms to support linguistic diversity.

The central thesis is clear: adult language learning is not an isolated cognitive task but an embodied, socially embedded process that unfolds within—and is often constrained by—power structures, institutional expectations, and interpersonal interactions. The authors persuasively argue that English in Australia operates simultaneously as a national identity marker, a legal instrument of migration management, and a form of human capital. This framing allows them to

connect individual narratives to broader social and political contexts, making the book valuable not only for linguists but also for policymakers, educators, and social scientists interested in migration and integration.

The content is presented through a compelling blend of narrative and analysis. Richly detailed participant stories—such as Yumiko’s inability to order apple juice due to pronunciation differences or Lou’s disorienting first night sleeping rough in Darwin—humanize the structural issues the authors describe. These vignettes highlight how everyday communication breakdowns can erode confidence and impede social participation. Importantly, the authors resist deficit-based portrayals of migrants, instead emphasizing resilience, adaptation, and agency, even under challenging conditions.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is its longitudinal perspective. By pooling data from multiple ethnographic projects conducted over twenty years, the authors capture both the immediacy of settlement experiences and the evolving trajectories of migrants’ language use over time. The breadth of the participant pool—130 core individuals from thirty-four countries—adds to the richness of the analysis, allowing the book to move beyond individual anecdotes to identify recurring patterns across different demographic and visa categories.

That said, the book’s breadth occasionally comes at the expense of depth in certain areas. For example, while the discussion of English as a legal instrument is insightful, the section might benefit from a more explicit comparative framework situating Australia’s policies alongside those of other multilingual nations. Similarly, the rich personal narratives sometimes outpace the theoretical integration; a brief synthesis at the end of each chapter, explicitly connecting the stories to the central thesis, could strengthen coherence for readers less familiar with sociolinguistic theory.

Another area for potential expansion is the pedagogical application. The book includes a short section on how to use it in teaching, but given the authors' backgrounds in teacher education, a more developed guide for educators—perhaps with sample discussion questions or classroom activities—would enhance its practical utility for those training future language teachers or working with migrant learners.

Stylistically, the writing is accessible and engaging, even for readers outside the field of applied linguistics. The avoidance of excessive jargon makes the book approachable for interdisciplinary audiences, though specialists may occasionally wish for more detailed methodological discussion. While the authors note the challenges of co-writing with six contributors across multiple continents, the narrative voice remains surprisingly consistent, a testament to careful editorial collaboration.

In evaluating the book's contribution, it is worth noting that *Life in a New Language* fills an important gap in the literature by centering the lived experience of migrants, rather than treating language proficiency as a static measure. The ethnographic approach illuminates the intersection of language with identity, belonging, and access to rights, areas often overlooked in policy discourse. The book also offers a valuable counterpoint to deficit-oriented narratives, emphasizing migrants' resourcefulness and the systemic changes needed to facilitate inclusion.

Life in a New Language is a significant and timely contribution to the study of language, migration, and integration. Its blend of personal narrative, policy analysis, and sociolinguistic insight will appeal to a wide range of social scientists. While certain sections could be deepened and the pedagogical component expanded, these are minor limitations in an otherwise compelling and well-researched work. For scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking to

understand the complex realities of learning and living through a new language, this book offers both a rich empirical foundation and a persuasive call to action.

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