Emergence in a transient social configuration – a linguistic ethnographic study of how strangers establish practices for working together within international development

PhD candidate - Katherine Kappa

This linguistic ethnographic case study investigates how relative strangers from various social, cultural and professional backgrounds come together for a time-limited period and how they establish social practices over time for collaborating on joint tasks.

The case study involves an 8-day ‘project visit’ as part of international development work. This visit is carried out by three new volunteers from a political solidarity organization who have not worked together with the three permanent staff members in their partner organization in Swaziland. All together they have to attend to various bureaucratic tasks such as monitoring an ongoing project and formulating a new development project.

First, the study reveals the importance of building a shared body of knowledge for the participants to be able to carry out their tasks together. Second, the study shows how social practices developed in the moment do not arise out of nowhere, but are often informed by broader institutional structures and ideologies. Third, the study illuminates how the participants are constrained and enabled in different ways to actively participate in the collaboration. In other words, the participants’ degree of knowledge, position within international development, differential access to linguistic and material resources all influence whether a participant is able to shape the ongoing work.