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Editorial

Digital language practices in superdiversity: Introduction



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This Special Issue brings together research at the intersection of two emerging areas of scholarship in sociocultural linguistics, digital communication and superdiversity. The nine papers explore their relationship from two angles: they examine the role of digital language practices in contexts of societal superdiversity, and the relevance of superdiversity as a theoretical perspective for the study of digital language practices. In our Introduction we first outline the concept of superdiversity and the way digital media and communications technologies are conceptualised in literature on superdiversity and some relevant earlier scholarship. We then turn to the reception of superdiversity in sociolinguistics and the role of digital language and literacy in this discussion. Drawing on the papers in this issue, we then outline a number of research perspectives on digital language practices in superdiversity. Finally the papers in the special issue are introduced.

1. Digital media in the concept of superdiversity

The term 'super-diversity' (as it was first spelt) was initially proposed by Vertovec (2006, 2007) as a "summary term" for the increasingly complex interplay of factors that shape patterns of immigration to metropolitan Britain and London in particular (Vertovec, 2007: 1025–1026). The idea of superdiversity is premised on a world-wide shift in migration patterns from relatively predictable migration flows up until the 1980s, to more diffuse and less predictable flows of migration since the early 1990s. These social transformations are causing an unparalleled diversification of diversity in societies hosting migrants, "not just in terms of bringing more ethnicities and countries of origin, but also with respect to a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live" (Vertovec, 2007: 1042). Whereas migration flows in/to Europe in the 1960–70s were dominated by state-organised labour recruitment schemes of migrant workers from around the Mediterranean as well as along colonial ties, the 1990s have witnessed migration from increasingly diverse places from literally all over the world, from persons with increasingly diverse social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, migrating for increasingly diverse motives, with increasingly diverse legal statuses, and in increasingly diverse trajectories. And whereas the earlier migration flows led to relatively stable and sizeable immigrant communities (e.g. of Turkish in Germany,

Portuguese in Luxembourg, Algerians in France, Mexicans in the U. S.) the post-Cold War migration flows are more differentiated and diversified and immigrant groups "newer, smaller, [more] transient, more socially stratified, less organised and more legally differentiated" and consequently more difficult to manage than 1950–70s migrations (Vertovec, 2010: 86). For Vertovec and others, superdiversity calls into question multiculturalism and multicultural identity politics (see also Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah, 2010).

An emphasis on digital communication technologies and the communicative practices they enable has been an important theme in Vertovec's research even before the notion of superdiversity was coined. In an article entitled "Cheap calls: the social glue of migrant transnationalism", Vertovec (2004) argues that "nothing has facilitated global linkage more than the boom in ordinary, cheap international telephone calls", and points out that

"The personal, real-time contact provided by international telephone calls is transforming the everyday lives of innumerable migrants. [...] Whereas throughout the world non-migrant families commonly have discussions across a kitchen table (for example, can we buy a refrigerator? What do we do about the teenager's behaviour? Who should take care of grandmother?), now many families whose members are relocated through migration conduct the same everyday discussions in real time across oceans. Cheap telephone calls have largely facilitated this. It is now common for a single family to be stretched across vast distances and between nation-states, yet still retain its sense of collectivity." (2004: 222).

It is important to remember that this interest did not emerge in a vacuum. Its seeds are to be found in earlier, influential theorising of cultural globalisation, migration and mobility. Appadurai (1996), whose five cultural dimensions of globalisation (ethno-, techno-, finance-, media-, and ideoscapes) has become a landmark reference point in the social-scientific theorising of globalisation, notes that

"The story of mass migrations (voluntary and forced) is hardly a new feature of human history. But when it is juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts and sensations, we have a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities. As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see

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moving images meet deterritorialized viewers. These create diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes.”

Appadurai's words have not lost much currency, even if the analogue technologies he mentions sound a little outdated at present. Satellite dishes, cassette tapes and VHS were at the core of diasporic mediascapes at the time of his writings, but have lost much of their practical value two decades later as they are replaced by newer digital and network technologies. This is equally true for descriptions of “sophisticated technologies” of just ten years ago. [Jacquemet \(2005\)](#), for instance, remarks

“Sophisticated technologies for rapid human mobility and electronic global communication (in its economic, political, and cultural modes flowing through such media as high-capacity planes, cable lines, television networks, fixed and mobile telephony, and the Internet) are advancing a process of constructing localities in relation to global sociopolitical forces [...] An increasing number of people around the globe learn to interact with historically and culturally distant communicative environments through new technologies (including the asynchronous channels of e-mail and voice-mail, the abridged idioms of cellular digital messaging, and the multi-media capabilities of web pages) and use newly acquired techno-linguistic skills (control of English, translation capabilities, knowledge of interactional routines in mediated environments).”

An attempt to update these descriptions with anno 2014 state-of-the-art information and communication technologies (we could think of touch-screen smartphones and their apps, cloud computing, 3D-printers, Google glass, and so on) will without any doubt be similarly outdated in the next ten years. From the viewpoint of this Special Issue, the lesson is that a focus on technologies themselves is bound to remain ephemeral and become rapidly outdated. We argue that the important difference from Appadurai to Jacquemet to present-day digital media is not in the mere devices, but in the changing qualities of whatever is being mediated and its place in everyday cultural practice. Appadurai's discussion positions media as containers of cultural products, such as music or sermons, that diasporic and mobile people consume and appropriate as resources for congregation and conviviality. Today, digital media is much more than that, as its capacity to store cultural productions is complemented by its capacity to facilitate deterritorialized interaction, individualised self-presentation, and large-scale participation in cultural and political discourses.

Note, however, that migration scholars' assessments of how technologies relate to new social relations vary. While the citations above might be read as technology-driven explanations of social change, [Glick-Schiller et al. \(1995: 52\)](#), for instance, argue that “jet planes, telephones, faxes, and internet” only facilitate rather than produce the tendency of today's transmigrants to go back and forth and maintain multiple linkages with their countries of origin. The important point for them is that “immigrant transnationalism is best understood as a response to the fact that in a global economy contemporary migrants have found full incorporation in the countries within which they resettle either not possible or not desirable.”

2. Superdiversity in language studies: the place of digital language practices

The role of digital technologies and practices in the construction of transnational identities and maintenance of transnational networks has not passed unnoticed in the uptake of superdiversity

in language studies. [Blommaert and Rampton \(2011\)](#) who took a leading role in introducing the notion of superdiversity to sociolinguistics, have argued that the socio-demographic changes Vertovec observed need to be seen in conjunction with the historically coinciding development of digital communication technologies and their spread in our everyday lives in the 1990s

“While emigration used to mean real separation between the emigré and his/her home society, involving the loss or dramatic reduction of social, cultural and political roles and impact there, emigrants and dispersed communities now have the potential to retain an active connection by means of an elaborate set of long-distance communication technologies. These technologies impact on sedentary ‘host’ communities as well, with people getting involved in transnational networks that offer potentially altered forms of identity, community formation and cooperation [...]. In the first instance, these developments are changes in the material world – new technologies of communication and knowledge as well as new demographics – but for large numbers of people across the world, they are also lived experiences and sociocultural modes of life that may be changing in ways and degrees that we have yet to understand.”

The recent interest of language scholars in superdiversity did not occur in a vacuum, either. It emerges at a time when mobility and globalisation have become major foci in sociolinguistic scholarship at an empirical as much as theoretical level. As studies of language and discourse turn to an ever-increasing range of mobile and globalised phenomena such as migration, tourism, and cultural industries (see e.g. the volumes edited by [Coupland, 2010](#); [Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010](#)), their theoretical apparatus, too, is increasingly shaped by metaphors of flow, fluidity and movement in an attempt to deconstruct notions of fixity and stability in our understanding of language and society. For example, whereas bilingual talk used to be analysed in terms of juxtapositions between grammatical systems (i.e. code-switching), it is now being reconceptualised as linguistic practice that transverse languages (i.e. translanguaging or polylinguaging; cf. [Canagarajah, 2013](#); [Creese and Blackledge, 2010b](#); [Garcia and Li, 2013](#); [Jørgensen et al., 2011](#)). Similarly, the former understanding of intercultural communication as communication between individuals socialised in supposedly distinct cultures is making place for transcultural approaches that focus on processes of borrowing, blending and *bricolage* not between, but across localities ([Pennycook, 2010](#)). Likewise, the notion of context is being diversified and destabilised in concepts such as recontextualisation, entextualisation, relocalisation or resemiotisation (e.g., [Iedema, 2003](#); [Silverstein and Urban, 1996](#)). At a higher order of abstraction, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis themselves are now imagined as being ‘on the move’, i.e. undergoing a process of reviewing central concepts of the field in response to shifts in contemporary social life as well as in keeping with developments in social theory ([Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010](#)).

In a sense, then, superdiversity epitomises the turn of sociolinguistics to these themes: it offers an ‘umbrella’ notion under which it seems possible to tackle their interaction, thereby also emphasising the importance of the communication technologies that enable and intensify the present-day global flows of people, discourses, and signs. In this way, the notion of superdiversity alerts us even more pressingly than that of globalisation to integrate digital language and literacy in our theorising of language, discourse and communication. Whereas early-days sociolinguistics predominantly studied language in physical, territorialised settings within nation-states and their institutions, today there is a range of mobile modes and transnational spaces of communication which need to be studied to understand the changing contexts of language and/in social life. However, with very few

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