



Digital superdiversity: A commentary



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ABSTRACT

Superdiversity has emerged as an important keyword in the field of sociolinguistics. In this article, I argue that the use of 'superdiverse' as a descriptive adjective is a theoretical cul-de-sac, because the complexities brought about by diversity in the social world ultimately defy numerical measurement (as it would require infinitely more fine-grained categories of difference). Consequently, superdiversity is best used as a conceptual device, that is, as a theoretical perspective on language and social life (e.g. Blommaert and Rampton 2011). As a conceptual tool, rather than an empirical fact, superdiversity is part of a broader concern in contemporary sociolinguistics to develop a new theoretical vocabulary. The articles collected in this special issue respond to this call and illustrate the diversities of digital engagement. However, while superdiversity directs our attention towards complexity and unpredictability, the papers collected also draw attention to a counter-movement: a persistent desire for normativity and predictability. In the final section of the article, I suggest that it would be fruitful to bring together on-going work on superdiversity with equally on-going work on creativity, as both share a focus on the unexpected and creative uses of language. Both thus provide a counter-narrative to the desire for normativity and predictability, and allow us to develop a theoretical perspective which moves beyond statistical patterns and conventions, and recognizes language as a fundamentally open system.

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1. Introduction: superdiversity as a sociolinguistic keyword

Superdiversity was introduced to the social science literature by Vertovec (2006), who used the term to describe the complexities of migration-based diversity in contemporary urban Britain.¹ Detailed demographic analyses of census data have shown that the diversity which characterizes Europe's metropolitan areas is changing: cities in the 21st century are attracting increasingly diverse groups of migrants, not only in terms of geographical origin and language, but also with regard to their legal status, educational background and gender. Diversity, in other words, is in the process of diversifying, fragmenting and complexifying.

Superdiversity and the idea of a complexification of diversity was taken up by a number of European scholars working on multilingualism, migration and the linguistic consequences of globalization (see, for example, Blommaert (2010), Creese and Blackledge (2010) and Blommaert and Rampton (2011)). The term has become popular in recent years and emerged – within a short space of time – as an important keyword in the field of

sociolinguistics. Fig. 1 illustrates the uptake of the term in sociolinguistic publications since 2006. Superdiversity has become part of the sociolinguistic vocabulary: it is heard at conferences and in debates, seen on websites and in publications. It is a concept which we may contest or resist, but which we cannot ignore (for a discussion of the idea of keywords see Williams (1983)).

From early on, the idea of superdiversity has been linked, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, to modern communication technologies. These technologies constitute an integral aspect of what Wang et al. (2014) call 'infrastructures of globalization', that is, the various tools, institutions and technologies – airplanes and cars, mobile phones, educational institutions, call centers and so forth – which facilitate and enable mobility (see also Urry (2007), discussion of what he calls 'mobility systems').

Communication technologies allow for connectivity across time and space (Vertovec, 2004) and facilitate the global mobility of knowledges, ideas and semiotic forms (Stæhr, 2014; Jonsson and Muhonen, 2014; Deumert, 2014). Although neither connectivity nor semiotic mobility pre-date the internet and mobile phones, communication technologies have brought about major changes in scale and facilitated complex multi-scalar interactions. Digital practices quite habitually localize the global because of the relative ease with which texts and signs can travel across space and time. Digital writers around the world have been shown to recontextualize global signs to express local meanings in everyday online

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¹ In the set of articles I received only one author (Heyd) spelt 'superdiversity' consistently with a hyphen. The loss of the hyphen indicates the naturalization of the term (a similar development occurred in the historical move from 'sociolinguistics' to 'sociolinguistics').

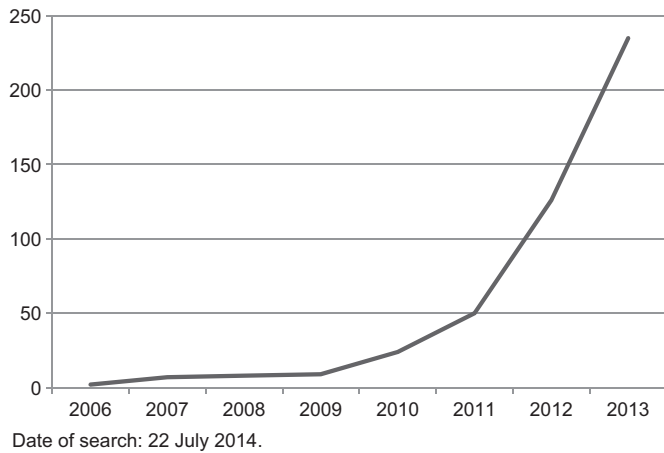


Fig. 1. Keyword search in Google Scholar: 'superdiversity' and 'sociolinguistics' (number of results returned per year).

interactions, and local signs can be catapulted 'virally' to global prominence within a short space of time (as in the case of, for example, the Korean music video *Gangnam Style* in 2012). The move to consider *digital superdiversity* in a special issue is thus timely.

This commentary consists of three parts: (1) a critical review of *superdiverse* as a descriptive category; (2) the theoretical work that sociolinguists have done in developing superdiversity as a new – broadly post-structuralist – paradigm for thinking about language and social life; and (3) the ways in which old modernist ways of thinking and acting are still with us, and dialectically shape sociolinguistic practices. I conclude with some reflections on an emerging topic in sociolinguistics which is a central feature of digital communication: creativity, and its relationship to superdiversity.

2. Superdiversity as a descriptive category: a theoretical *cul-de-sac*

The *super-* prefix, which is highly productive in English, is usually interpreted as indicating something which is of a higher quality or degree: a *super-hurricane* is larger and more devastating than an ordinary hurricane, something that is *super-easy* is very easy, a person who is *super-hip*, is more than just hip. *Super-*, in this sense, is roughly equivalent to *hyper-*, and the variant *hyperdiversity* can indeed be found in the literature. In some of the articles collected here, superdiversity – or rather its adjective *superdiverse* – appears as such a descriptive category. It captures a state of affairs which sets that what is being observed apart from 'just diversity'. For example, Luc Belling and Julia de Bres characterize Luxembourg as a 'small but superdiverse country'; Andreas Stæhr refers to Copenhagen as a 'superdiverse metropolis'; Branca Fabricio writes about our 'superdiverse times'; and Theresa Heyd describes some of the online narratives she discusses as 'diverse ... in fact, superdiverse biographies'. Yet, how do we know if something is not 'just diverse' or 'ordinary diverse', but indeed superdiverse? Heyd raises this question in her conclusion:

Is there a cut-off for superdiversity? How diverse and complex does a racial/ethnic identity have to be in order to pass for 'super-diverse'?

Similarly, when Reyes (2014, p. 368) discusses superdiversity as one of the main trends in linguistic anthropology in 2013, she asks: 'If [the world] is superdiverse now, how was it diverse to

some "regular" degree before?' This is a valid question if we want to use superdiverse as a descriptive adjective, and especially if we want to argue that something has changed in the social world of the 21st century. Are the diversities we see in the contemporary metropolis or in digital spaces quantitatively and qualitatively different from the diversities of, for example, multilingual colonial or post-colonial cities or the complex historical contact situations which gave rise to the emergence of pidgin/creole languages? If we want to make such comparisons, then we need to establish a kind of threshold at which the ordinary diverse becomes superdiverse.

Describing and explaining spatial and historical patterns of diversity are a challenge not only for linguists and social scientists, but also for ecologists and biologists, who use the term superdiverse to describe regions characterized by exceptionally high levels of biodiversity. Superdiversity in biological terms is squarely a question of species richness: it can be measured, analyzed statically and plotted on graphs (Hughes et al., 2001). Quantitative measurements of diversity have also been attempted in linguistics. The best known measure is probably the diversity index of Greenberg (1956) which is used by the *Ethnologue* to capture levels of within-country diversity (Lewis et al., 2014). Greenberg, however, did not establish thresholds or distinguished particular patterns or formations of diversity. The diversity index simply estimates the likelihood that two people in a given geographical area will speak the same language. It is a continuous numerical measure, ranging from 0 (everyone speaks the same language) to 1 (no two people share a language). While the DI gives each language equal weight in the calculation, the notion of 'linguistic hotspots' – popular in language endangerment discourses – suggests that linguistic diversity is not merely a matter of quantity, but also of quality: some cities or geographical areas might have many languages, but if these languages are not typologically distinct and belong to the same language family, then the area is not a 'hotspot' of diversity.

The idea that diversity can be measured underpins much work in the field of language endangerment where numbers and statistics are often used rhetorically to emphasize the scope of the loss of diversity, and to lobby support for documentation as a core activity of linguistics (see Anderson (2011), for an example of such emotionally charged discourse; and Heller and Duchêne (2006), as well as Hill (2002), for critical discussions).² Contemporary sociolinguistics, on the other hand, have convincingly rejected the idea that languages are bounded objects which can be described, counted and measured (Makoni and Pennycook, 2006; see also Harris (1980) and Møller and Jørgensen (2009)). Thus, although speakers might name languages and imagine them in particular ways, 'a language' is not an object in the world – akin to a biological species – but a second-order cultural and ideological construct. And as such it is located in the domain of beliefs and ideologies, and ultimately cannot be measured and counted. And if it cannot be counted, then we cannot determine whether a particular city, country or region is 'minimally diverse', 'diverse' or 'superdiverse' – we can only describe whether its residents or visitors view the area as being of a different diversity than another area.

In other words, if we take post-2000 theoretical developments in sociolinguistics seriously and move away from languages-as-objects to languages-as-doing (Androutsopoulos, 2014), then we must avoid approaching superdiversity as a descriptive category which applies more to some contexts (prototypically the late-

² There is an interesting tension here: while descriptive linguists lament the decline of diversity, sociolinguists celebrate the growth of diversity. The two are obviously not the same types of diversity and careful comparison of the two opposing discourses would be worthwhile.

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