



# Asylum and superdiversity: The search for denotational accuracy during asylum hearings



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## ABSTRACT

Using ethnographic evidence from asylum cases in various European states, this paper explores the problematic search for denotational referentiality during asylum hearings. The claim of this paper is that superdiverse, multilingual environments cause Western institutions to depend heavily on denotational signs (such as proper names) to determine asylum seekers' credibility. Asylum officers, in particular, routinely rely on common-sense assumptions about the denotational power of proper names (especially the ease of translating personal and place names) to determine the credibility of a particular testimony. However, this reliance on denotation can have serious negative effects on asylum adjudication, especially in the assessment of asylum applicants' referential accuracy, which is considered a litmus test for determining applicants' credibility.

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## 1. Superdiversity, multilingualism, and institutional settings

The last three decades have been characterized by the progressive globalization of communicative practices and social formations resulting from the increasing mobility of people, languages, and texts (Giddens, 1990; Appadurai, 1996; Jameson and Miyoshi, 1998; Tomlinson, 1999; Nederveen Pieterse, 2003; Pennycook, 2007). Sophisticated technologies for rapid human mobility and electronic global communication—such as high-capacity airplanes, television cable lines and satellite link-ups, fixed and mobile telephony, and the Internet—are producing communicative environments where multiple languages and multiple channels of interaction are simultaneously evoked by transnational speakers no longer anchored in clearly identifiable national languages (De Swaan, 2001; Jacquemet, 2005; Danet and Herring, 2007; Pennycook, 2007).

European scholars working on this cluster of mobile people and mobile media are increasingly evoking the paradigm of “superdiversity” to refer to the vastly increased range of linguistic, religious, ethnic, and cultural resources characterizing late-modern societies. The term was coined by Steve Vertovec in a review of demographic and socio-economic changes in post-Cold War Britain: “Super-diversity underscores the fact that the new conjunctions and interactions of variables that have arisen over the past decade surpass the ways - in public discourse, policy debates and academic literature - that we usually understand diversity in Britain.” (2007: 1025).

As Blommaert and Rampton (2011) pointed out, superdiversity should be understood as *diversification of diversity* due to changes in migration patterns in Europe and elsewhere. This diversity cannot be understood in terms of multiculturalism (the presence of multiple cultures in one society) alone. At the basis of this shift are the changing patterns and itineraries of

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migration into Europe and the continued migration by the same people inside Europe: “More people are now moving from more places, through more places, to more places” (Vertovec, 2010:86). In effect, people bring with them ever more varied resources and experiences from different places in their everyday interactions and encounters with others and institutions.

The term “superdiversity” does have numerous limitations and a growing list of critics who object to its imprecise theoretical fuzziness, a lack of engagement with political theory, a metropolitan Eurocentric bias, and a neo-liberal euphoric thrust, exemplified by the prefix “super.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, this concept captures the mutated reality of contemporary metropolitan life. The world is now full of settings where deterritorialized speakers use a mixture of languages in interacting with family, friends, and coworkers; read English and other “global” languages on their computer screens; watch local, regional, or global broadcasts; and access popular culture in a variety of languages. Such settings will become ever more widespread in the future and superdiversity will become the standard modality.

However, there are negative consequences about living in a superdiverse environment. One of the most serious of these may be an increasing lack of predictability. As Blommaert argues, a few decades ago it would have been possible to predict with some degree of certainty what a 14-year-old grade-school student in an European metropolis would be like: her looks, mother tongue, religious affiliation, cultural preferences, and musical taste were much more restricted than what we observe today. Now the identities of native-born and immigrants alike are impossible to predict. Blommaert observes, “[t]he pre-suppositions of common integration policies - that we know who the immigrants are, and that they have a shared language and culture - can no longer be upheld” (2010: 7).

This lack of predictability is particularly vexing for the apparatuses of national sovereignty. Needing to regulate access to state-controlled resources by a wider range of speakers (from natives to aliens) but unable to ensure smooth institutional interactions, nation-states have grudgingly set up procedures to handle not only the local population but also the growing number of deterritorialized speakers and their multiple languages.

In this paper I document a particular kind of institutional encounter: that between state officials and asylum seekers, who make up what some might consider the most confounding category of international migrant. Most Western nations (as well as international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Jesuit Refugee Service) have set up facilities run by one or more officials, who attempt to handle the various needs of asylum seekers by providing them with interpreters, access to websites containing information useful to their cases, and the services of lawyers, social workers, and cultural mediators.

Despite such efforts, the asylum process remains a site where multilingual practices come into conflict with national language ideologies. State bureaucrats in particular impose norms and forms (shaped by national concerns and ethnocentric cultural assumptions) on immigrants barely able to understand the nation’s local language, let alone state officials’ procedures for conducting in-depth interviews, writing reports, and producing the records required in order for institutions to grant refugees access to local resources (Eades and Arends, 2004; Pollabauer, 2004; Maryns and Blommaert, 2001; Blommaert, 2009).

During the asylum process, state and international agencies focus mostly on the denotational axis (the link between description and the thing or event described) to determine the credibility of an asylum seeker’s application. Applicants are asked at various steps in the procedure to provide denotational information (personal names, date and place of birth, names of relatives, place names, etc.), which is then probed by officers in order to assess the credibility of the applicants’ claims. In this context, asylum seekers are responsible for the accuracy of their statements, while examiners and adjudicators use the communicative power of their techno-political practices (questioning, producing a record, checking databases, and so on) to ensure that applicants’ claims are verifiable in accordance with dominant understandings of the referential world. In such a multilingual environment, the officers’ search for, and the applicants’ production of, the proper reference is rendered problematic by the intercultural breakdowns resultant from discrepant semiotics of the referential world. As a result, applicants need to make sure that the denotational information they supply is properly produced and interpreted, or face the charge of being not credible—which in the cases discussed below may mean incarceration, deportation, torture, and death.

<sup>1</sup> Scholarly understanding of diversity is undergoing a paradigmatic shift. The concept of superdiversity reflects new preoccupations for both scholars and policy-makers and as such deserves our attention. Yet, because of its development in a European context, it suffers from an undeniable Eurocentric perspective and, ironically, lacks historical perspective. Finally, scholars who use it to replace “multilingualism,” especially in policy debates, may have inadvertently opted for a neoliberal slant echoing the euphoric representation of a contemporary world of new media, big data, and “supersizes” (Reyes, 2014). Nevertheless, the phenomena that the term “superdiversity” seeks to address are real and deserve our attention, particularly if we extend this concept’s reach to the analysis of the communicative mutations resulting not only from complex migration flows but also from developments in the field of communication technologies. The contemporary complexity of migration depends on, and is enabled by, communicative technologies that have made digital media accessible to everyone, via mobile phones and linked computers, producing an epochal transformation in access to knowledge infrastructure (just think of Google) and in long-distance interactions. Transcontinental travels, transnational moves, chain migrations, and diasporic networks have been greatly facilitated by these new technologies. In turn, migration and technological innovations result in mutated communicative repertoires and more complex forms of communication. However, language scholars have been slow to examine the intersection of mobile people and mobile texts. In the last decade, we can find solid work on migration and language and also heightened attention to the linguistic analysis of electronic technologies, but there has been very little work that combines these two fields. Blommaert (2011) is a notable exception, as is the work of Jørgensen et al., (2011). I believe that the concept of “superdiversity” should be stretched to include not only migrants’ linguistic practices on the ground but also their (and everybody else’s) digital interactions. It is with this perspective that elsewhere (Jacquemet, 2005) I developed the concept of “transidiomatic practices,” and I continue to investigate this intersection of media and migration in my forthcoming book (Jacquemet, 2015).

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