Commentary: Superdiversity old and new

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reviews the papers in this volume as successful attempts at unthinking a legacy of nation-state sociolinguistics, enabled by developments in Europe-based sociolinguistics and US-based linguistic anthropology. After offering arguments on why superdiversity should best be seen as an advanced and synthetic perspective on language and society and pointing out its fundamentally critical nature, two key issues articulated in the papers in this volume are isolated for discussion. The first one is the nature of contemporary power, articulated through an increased tension between policies strengthening the objective and monocentric language community of the nation-state, and polycentric, centrifugal speech communities. The contemporary state becomes increasingly anachronistic as an actor in the field of language in society. The second key issue is the need to rethink the foundations of "community", as developed in a classical Durkheimian–Parsonian sociology. Especially the connection between online and offline semiotic and social worlds yields issues of complexity, now made visible by a more accurate and precise sociolinguistics.

1. Introduction

If the papers in this volume make one thing clear, it is the weight of two centuries of nation-state thinking on our current perceptions of sociocultural communities such as those of language users, their characteristics and dynamics.[1] The nation-state was, and remains, the defining circumscription for an emerging social science complex of which linguistics was very much part. It offered a set of images and metaphors that defined the scope, direction and boundaries of these sciences, and this scope can be understood here literally as a spatial demarcation of phenomena and processes. Languages were distributed within and separated by national boundaries, and the national boundaries, in turn, also defined the criteria of belonging and membership of the national community, creating "migration" and, later, "transnational" and "global" flows as deviant patterns hard to fit within the monocentric nation-state imagination. "Diversity" stood, and stands, for that which violates the rules of a spatially imagined political, historical, social, cultural and linguistic monocentricity. To the extent that sociolinguistics can be defined as the science of linguistic diversity (cf. Hymes, 1972: 39), sociolinguistics itself (and, given the roots of sociolinguistics in anthropology, I include linguistic anthropology into this category) was from its very inception the odd one out: a science of transgression that violated the central spatial metaphors of "mainstream" social science, a science of the margins.

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[1] I am grateful to Paja Faudree and Becky Schulthies for focused discussion on some of the papers and the broader context in which they must be set.

It is easy to overlook the importance of language ideologies in the development of our current sociolinguistic thinking about diversity, for insights from that field have now effectively been incorporated into most mature fields of sociolinguistic work. Yet, it was by means of language ideologies that we have been able to create a new unit of semiotic analysis: a layered and fractured (Bakhtinian, some would argue) unit offers us ways now of reading sociolinguistic phenomena against the background of actual political processes that are seen as ideological, and thus in need of deconstruction. This deconstruction rapidly touched the foundations of the nation-state imagery and enabled us to see "national" sociolinguistics as a historically situated, politically nonrandom ideological configuration carrying power and authority on grounds other than accurate diagnostics of sociolinguistic reality (Silverstein, 1996, 1998; Kroskrity, 2000; Gal and Woolard, 2001). And the empirical units of analysis – now often called registers – prompted a thoroughly innovative approach to language in society, not constrained by the borders of the nation-state other than in ideological ways, and organized through delicate and dynamic indexical connections between semiotic form and social function, the patterns of which cannot be taken for granted a priori but need to be established by ethnographic case-by-case inspection (Agha, 2007). Naturally, this approach deconstructs the idea of diversity as well, taking it from the margins of linguistic field scoping to its very center. The papers in this volume document this move and tag it onto the development of an emerging perspective of sociolinguistic "superdiversity".

In what follows, I shall first briefly engage with the emergence of this superdiversity perspective – from an autobiographical viewpoint as an actor in that field – and focus on the question as to what kind of innovative purchase it might offer. After that, I will focus on the key contributions made by the papers in this volume: an issue of power in which an anachronistic state is the protagonist, and an issue of the nature and structure of contemporary communities will be discussed. I conclude with an expression of optimism as well as a caution, unsurprising after an engagement with a collection of papers of exceptional quality.

2. What is new about superdiversity?

The question can be heard in various corners: what is new about superdiversity? Haven't we seen all of this before? And do we *need* superdiversity when so much it brings to the surface is a matter of *recognition* of patterns and processes already long present?

Let me try to answer this question. In Blommaert and Rampton (2011), we described language and superdiversity as a space of synthesis, a point of convergence or a nexus of developments long underway. We presented superdiversity as a paradigmatic project, a *tactic* in other words, not a subdiscipline – it is defined primarily by a theoretical and methodological explorative perspective rather than by a set of specifically 'superdiverse' phenomena or a fixed set of concepts. I will return to these phenomena in a moment. This perspective revolves around the acceptance of *uncertainty* in sociolinguistic analysis: the fact that superdiversity denies us the comfort of a set of easily applicable assumptions about our object, its features and its meanings. From this acceptance of uncertainty, two other methodological principles follow: (a) we see complexity, hybridity, 'impurity' and other features of 'abnormal' sociolinguistic objects as 'normal'; and (b) the uncertainty compels us towards an ethnographic stance, in which we go out to find out how sociolinguistic systems operate rather than to project a priori characteristics onto them.

With regard to (a) above, what superdiversity has provoked, I believe, is an awareness that a lot of what used to be qualified as 'exceptional', 'aberrant', 'deviant' or 'unusual' in language and its use by people, *is in actual fact quite normal*. The exception has become the rule, so to speak. Historically, there is some logic behind this insight. Many of the scholars, certainly those in the European tradition, currently working on language and superdiversity were analyzing *codeswitching* a couple of decades ago. Codeswitching was, until the mid-nineties, widely seen as a 'deviant' phenomenon, violating a default rule of monolingual speech, seriously complicating linguistic analysis, and often situated only among bilingual communities (also presented as something rather unusual). People may wish to return to landmark work such as that of Carol Myers Scotton (1993) for evidence of the abnormalization of codeswitching. They will encounter strange bilingual creatures doing strange things with two languages, causing complications in social life and sending two grammars battling in their minds (cf. Meeuwis and Blommaert, 1994). Working on forms of codeswitching and on the particular patterns of multilingualism they suggested meant that scholars came across increasingly 'messy' data – effects, indeed, of the gradual increase of diversity in large urban centers around the world,[2] as well as, somewhat later, the strange new forms of literacy crawling through the internet. Peter Auer's (1998) collection *Code-switching in Conversation* testifies to the engagement of researchers with increasingly complex forms of mixing and shifting, and to the fundamental questions that emerged from them.[3] The thing is that, engaging with such messy materials, questions of 'language', 'community', 'meaning' came up – questions evidently having far wider relevance than just in this field of messy stuff.

To be sure, and I already flagged this above, such question did not *only* emerge from such largely European work. US-based linguistic anthropology had equally questioned the fundamentals of the study of language in society, and especially since the

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[2] Such phenomena later proved not to be confined to the large urban centers often seen as "global cities". They occur as well in peri-urban and rural areas, and not just in the core of the world system but also in its margins (see below, Wang et al. 2014). In fact, attention for "marginal" phenomena distinguishes work on sociolinguistic superdiversity from the more sociological and anthropological approaches to it.

[3] The list of contributors to Auer's book includes at least five scholars later explicitly working on language and superdiversity: Jens Normann Jörgensen, Ben Rampton, Christopher Stroud, Li Wei and Jan Blommaert.