

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 121

Chronotopes, scales and complexity in the study of language in society

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January 2015



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in the study of language in society

Jan Blommaert

Abstract:

Recent developments in the study of language in society have moved the field increasingly away from linear models towards complex models. The complexity of timespace as an aspect of what is called “context” is of key importance in this development, and this article engages with two possibly useful concepts in view of this: chronotope and scale. Chronotope can be seen as invocable chunks of history organizing the indexical order of discourse; scale, in turn can be seen as the scope of communicability of such invocations. Thus, whenever we see chronotopes, we see them mediated by scales. The cultural stuff of chronotopes is conditioned by the sociolinguistic conditions of scale. This nuanced approach to timescale contextualization offers new directions for complexity-oriented research in our fields.

Keywords: Context, sociolinguistics, history, complexity, chronotope, scale

1. Introduction

The conceptual work that I wish to document in this essay must be seen as part of a bigger effort in linguistic anthropology and adjacent sciences to arrive at more *precise* and *realistic* accounts of an object of study which, by exactly such attempts, is bound to remain unstable and subject to perpetual upgrading and reformulation. In the most general sense, the issue is

one of adequate contextualization of language signs in an attempt to understand their meaning effects; but as we shall see, precisely this attempt towards adequate contextualization creates objects that are no longer linguistic in the strict disciplinary sense of the term, but more generally semiotic, complex objects.

The particular axis of contextualization I shall discuss here is that of “timespace” – the literal translation of the term “chronotope” designed by Bakhtin in the 1930s (Bakhtin 1981: 84; Bemong & Borghart 2010: 4-5). Chronotope refers to the intrinsic blending of space and time in any event in the real world, and was developed by Bakhtin, as we shall see, as an instrument for developing a fundamentally historical semiotics.¹ As such, and in spite of the daunting Greekness of the term, it has had an impact on scholarship. The same cannot be said (yet) of the second concept I shall discuss, “scale” – developed initially to point towards the non-unified, layered and stratified nature of meaningful signs and their patterns of circulation. A small amount of work has been done using scale as a conceptual tool, often studies of globalization.

In what follows, I shall first set the discussion in a broader issue: that of “context” and contextualization; I shall then introduce chronotopes and scales as potentially useful concepts, after which I shall merge them with the issue of contextualization and show how timespace complexity can (and does) enrich work in our fields of study.

2. Complicating context

Notions such as scale and chronotope help us overcome two persisting problems in the study of language in society. These problems persist in spite of decades of work offering solutions

¹ Brandao (2006) discusses the Einsteinian lineage of Bakhtin’s chronotope; Holquist (2010) reviews its philosophical foundations. Since I shall focus on how Bakhtin’s work can speak to contemporary theoretical and analytic concerns in linguistic anthropology, I consider these issues beyond the scope of this essay.

to them; such solutions, however, are usually relegated to the realm of advanced scholarship, while the problems are part of most “basic” approaches to issues in our fields.

The first problem is that studies of language in society tend to apply a simple untheorized distinction in the “levels of context” included in analysis: the *micro versus macro distinction*. Discourse analysis of spoken interaction, or the sociolinguistic analysis of individual variables in speech would typify *micro-analysis*, while ideologically oriented critical discourse analysis and studies of language policy and language attitudes would typify the latter. A rough gloss could be: while “micro” approaches examine how people affect language, “macro” approaches would focus on how language affects people. The second problem, closely related to this, is the dominance of *one-dimensional models of meaning* (cf. Silverstein 1992: 57).

There is a widespread assumption that language in actual social use must yield *one* “meaning”, both as a locally emerging behavioral effect pushing participants in a conversation from one turn into the other and from opening to closing, and as a local denotational correlate of correct and intentional morphosyntactic work by a “speaker”. This second problem presupposes a vast amount of shared resources among language users, including agreements about the conventions governing their deployment.

Note in passing that I used the term “*local*” here: in our common analytic vocabulary, “micro” stands for “local” and “macro” stands for “translocal” – spatial metaphors defining a particular scope of context. And “local”, in addition, also often occurs as a synonym for *synchronic*: the things that happen here-and-now in a particular speech event. Space and time are interchangeable features in the way we talk about analysis; I shall have occasion, of course, to return to this point.

There is a mountain of literature criticizing the “micro-macro” distinction, very often targeting the inadequacies of “micro” approaches, which, as I said, persist in spite of such

critical work.² Most authors would argue that inadequacies occur precisely at the interstices of several “levels” of context, as when the range of contextual-conversational inferences transcends the scope of what is purely brought about in the “local” conversational context and needs to include broader sociocultural “frames” of contextual knowledge (Goffman 1974; Gumperz 1992; Silverstein 1992); or when what looks like a single and coherent activity – a multiparty conversation, for instance – proves upon closer inspection to contain several different, not entirely aligned or even conflicting, activities, calling into question the levels of “sharedness” in purpose and orientation of the different participants (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992; Goodwin 2007; Cicourel 1992; see also Goffman 1964). So, what is “brought about” as a joint collaborative activity such as a conversation may obscure deep differences in what is being “brought along” by different participants, and consequently in what is “taken along” by these participants after the activity. As all of us who have done some teaching know, people can walk away from seemingly focused speech events with divergent understandings of “what was actually said”.

This has a direct bearing on our second problem, that of one-dimensional models of meaning, and the connection between both problems was clearly spelled out by Silverstein (1992), drawing on the new wave of studies of language ideologies moving in at that time. Silverstein distinguished between two views of interaction, one centered on intentionally produced and organized denotation (a one-dimensional view), and another centered on what was achieved *indexically* by means of a complex mode of communicative behavior in which pragmatic and metapragmatic (ideological) aspects are inseparable – a multidimensional view in which vastly more is achieved by participants than merely denotational alignment. The language-

² The most comprehensive early discussion of these inadequacies, tremendously relevant but rarely used these days, is probably Cicourel’s *The Social Organization of Juvenile Justice* (1967); see also Silverstein (1992); Hanks (1996); Duranti (1997); Blommaert (2001 and 2005) for extended discussions. Two collections of essays, now slightly dated, provide broadly scoped discussions of context: Auer & DiLuzio (1992) and Duranti & Goodwin (1992).

ideological dimension of semiosis, we have since learned, moves the field of analysis into very different directions: Saussurean language is substituted by a multiplex “total linguistic fact” (about which more in a moment); the analysis of communication shifts from intention to *effects*, of which denotation is just one; and such effects are necessarily unstable and indeterminate – hence “creative” .

The nexus of the two problems I identified earlier is *indexicality*: language-ideologically “loaded” semiotic features (indexicals) come in as a “translocal” but “locally” enacted layer of *historical* meaning. Indexicality, in Silverstein’s conception, brings into profile the historical dimension of Goffman’s frames: when we perform interpretive work, we draw on relatively conventionalized (and therefore historical) sets of metapragmatically attributive meaning – “tropes” (Silverstein 1992: 69; also Agha 1997, 2007a) – that are triggered by indexicals providing presupposable pointers to “those implicit values (...) of relational identity and power that, considered as an invokable structure, go by the name of ‘culture’” (Silverstein 1992: 57; also Agha 1997). The interstices between distinct “levels” of context disappear because each “local” (micro) act of contextualization operates by means of locally (in)validated invocations of “translocal” (macro) meanings:

“The point is that social life as *interactions* that constantly call up culture (and its deployability or realization in them) and reinvest it with their historicity, is the object of this wider construal of ‘contextualization’.” (ibid)

And the Gumperzian “contextualization cues” – the target of Silverstein’s critique – reemerge as semiotic features (indexicals) prompting “local” interpretations grounded in “translocal” historically configured ascriptions of genre, key, footing and identity often captured under the term “register” (Agha2005; 2007a; Silverstein 2003, 2006). Which is why uniquely situated activities such as talk in school can, and do, contribute not just to learning but also to

membership of social class and other “macro” social categories: “Collective socio-historical schemas are continuously reconstituted in within the flows and contingencies of situated activity” (Rampton 2006: 344; Wortham 2006).

Meaning in context here appears as a more broadly conceived complex of *valuations* – indexicals point to what *counts as meaning* in a specific semiotic event. To make this point relevant for what follows, let us underscore that *value* and *history* are central here: we best see “meaning” as *value effects* derived from local enactments of historically loaded semiotic resources (cf. Blommaert 2005, chapter 4; cf. also Agha 1997: 495). The “local” and “micro”, therefore is not “synchronic” but profoundly historical, and the micro-macro distinction (our first problem) has become irrelevant, since every instance of “micro” contextualization would at once be an instance of “macro” contextualization. As for the one-dimensional view of meaning as a singular and linear outcome of interaction (our second problem), it is replaced by a multidimensional package of effects, some of which are “locally” enacted and others occurring later in forms of re-entextualization (Silverstein & Urban 1996; Blommaert 2001). What is “taken along” from one semiotic event is “brought along” into the next one. And *this* is our object of study: the total linguistic (or semiotic) fact

“is irreducibly dialectic in nature. It is an unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualised to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (Silverstein 1985:220)

This object has become a complex nonlinear and multidimensional thing; the context in which it operates has likewise become a complex dialectics of features pointing at once to various “levels”. And due to this fusion of “micro” and “macro”, this total linguistic/semiotic fact is intrinsically historical: a reality to which Voloshinov directed our attention long ago. Which brings us to Bakhtin.

3. Chronotope and scale

Recall that I emphasized value and history, because these notions lead us right to the core of Bakhtin's view of language and are indispensable in our discussion of chronotope. Let me briefly elaborate both.

Bakhtin's concept of language is a sociolinguistic one, containing not just "horizontal" distinctions such as dialects (linguistic variation) but also "vertical" ones such as genres, professional jargons and the like (social variation). To be more specific, Bakhtin sees language in its actual deployment (as e.g. in a novel) as a repository of "internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence" (Bakhtin 1981: 263). At any moment of performance, the language (or discourse, as Bakhtin qualifies it) actually used will enable an historical-sociological analysis of different "voices" within the social stratigraphy of language of that moment: Bakhtin's key notion of heteroglossia – the delicate "dialogical" interplay of socially (ideologically, we would now say) positioned voices in e.g. a novel – is the building block of a "sociological stylistics" (id. 300); and as he demonstrated in the various essays in *The Dialogical Imagination*, this sociological stylistics is necessarily *historical*.³ In actual analysis, it operates via a principle of indexicality, in which the use of genre features such as "common language (...) is taken by the author precisely as the *common view*, as the verbal approach to people and things normal for a given sphere of society" (id. 301; cf. also Rampton 2003). Form is used to project socially stratified meaning ("verbal-ideological belief systems", id. 311), and this indexical nexus creates what

³ It is a truism but very often overlooked or underplayed, for instance by Holquist: Bakhtin worked in an era in which the intellectual milieu was circumscribed by Marxism and in which a lot of work – including so-called "dissident" work – developed in a critical dialogue with various degrees of Marxist orthodoxy. Evidently, Voloshinov's (and Bakhtin's?) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1973) is a case in point. Bakhtin's inclinations towards history and sociology (and the necessity of a *historical* sociology) are reflexes of Marxist scholarship.

we call “style”, for it can be played out, always hybridized, in ways that shape recognizable meaning effects “created by history and society” (id. 323).

The step from history to value is a small one. The stratified sociolinguistic diversity which is central to Bakhtin’s view of language – its historically specific heteroglossic structure – means that *understanding* is never a linear “parsing” process; it is an *evaluative* one. When Bakhtin talks about understanding, he speaks of “integrated meaning that relates to value – to truth, beauty and so forth – and requires a *responsive* understanding, one that includes evaluation” (Bakhtin 1986: 125). The dialogical principle evidently applies to uptake of speech as well, and such uptake involves the interlocutor’s own historically specific “verbal-ideological belief systems” and can only be done from within the interlocutor’s own specific position in a stratified sociolinguistic system. Nothing, consequently, is “neutral” in this process – not even time and space, as his discussion of chronotope illustrates.

Bakhtin designed chronotope to express the inseparability of time and space in human social action, and he selected the “literary artistic chronotope” where “spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole”, in such a way that the chronotope could be seen as “a formally constitutive category of literature” (1981: 84).

Identifying chronotopes enabled Bakhtin to address the co-occurrence of events from different times and places in novels. He saw chronotopes as an important aspect of the novel’s heteroglossia, part of the different “verbal-ideological belief systems” that were in dialogue in a novel.

I make this point in order to dispel with two, in my view misguided, interpretations of chronotope: one in which chronotopes are used as *descriptive* tools, shorthand for the ways in which time and space are actually represented in discourse (e.g. Crossley 2006; Wang 2009); another one in which chronotope is seen as the cognitive theory behind Bakhtin’s work, a

memory structure not unlike schemata (e.g. Keunen 2000). Both interpretations miss what is perhaps the most productive aspect of the chronotope concept: its connection to *historical and momentary agency*. In Bakhtin's analyses, chronotopes invoke and enable a plot structure, characters or identities, and social and political worlds in which actions become dialogically meaningful, evaluated and understandable in specific ways. Specific chronotopes produce specific kinds of person, actions, meaning and value. Decoding them is in itself a chronotopic phenomenon, in addition, in which other historicities convene in the here-and-now historicity of understanding.

We shall see how productive this can be for our scholarship. For now, let us gloss Bakhtin's chronotopes as "invokable histories", elaborate frames in which time, space and patterns of agency coincide, create meaning and value, and can be set off against other chronotopes.

Which is why the subtitle to Bakhtin's essay on "Forms of time and of chronotope in the novel" was "Notes towards a historical poetics" – Bakhtin's problem was that novels are not just historical objects (Dickens wrote in the mid-19th century) but also articulate complexly layered historicities, the historical ideological positions of narrator, plot and characters, in the form of chronotopes.

Chronotopes presuppose the non-uniformity of historical spacetime in relation to human consciousness and agency, and they share this presupposition with that other concept I must discuss here: scale. The origins of the latter concept lie elsewhere, in Braudel's majestic study *La Méditerranée* (1949). Braudel distinguished three "levels" of history: the very slow history of climate and landscape (but also including "mentalities", Braudel 1958: 51) which he called *durée*, an intermediate cyclical history of "conjunctures", and the day-to-day history of "événements". The three levels correspond to different speeds of development, from the very slow change in climate to the very rapid pace of everyday events. These distinctions also coincided with different levels of human consciousness and agency: most individuals are not

acutely aware of the bigger and slower historical processes of which they are part, while they are aware of events and incidents punctuating their lives; and while no individual can alone and deliberately change the climate, individuals influence and have a degree of agency over their everyday historical context; and while individual people can influence their own lives with individual actions that take hardly any time (as when they commit a murder), it takes enormous numbers of people and actions spread over a very long time span for the climate to change. Processes developing at the level of the *durée*, consequently, were seen by Braudel as developing at another “scale” as those happening in the here-and-now, and note that Braudel’s distinction between levels of history includes a range of theoretical statements involving levels of human consciousness and agency. A “comprehensive” history, according to Braudel, had to include all of these different scales, since every historical moment was and is a nexus of all of these scales.

Braudel’s concept of history was refined and expanded by Immanuel Wallerstein in an attempt to develop what he called “World-System Analysis” – a new social science that addressed the many intricate forms of historical linkage and exchange that characterize the emergence of an increasingly globalizing capitalist world (Wallerstein 2004). Wallerstein rejected the focus on time alone and opted instead for a (by now familiar) unitary notion of TimeSpace, with more “scales” than in Braudel’s framework (Wallerstein 1997). The details of Wallerstein’s scalar stratigraphy need not concern us here – the point to take on board is that, like Braudel, Wallerstein connects TimeSpace “levels” with levels of human awareness and agency; an individual vote for a political party during elections is an action at a different scale than that party winning the elections, which is again different from that party forming a government and implementing a neoliberal austerity program.

As mentioned at the outset, while chronotopes have had a relatively rewarding career in scholarship in our fields, scales are relatively under-used so far. When that notion was

introduced in sociolinguistic work, it was presented as a concept that might do exactly what Braudel and Wallerstein used it for: to make fine stratigraphic distinctions between “levels” of sociolinguistic activity, thus enabling distinctions as to power, agency, authority and validity that were hard to make without a concept that suggested vertical – hierarchical – orders in meaning making (Wortham 2006, 2009; Blommaert 2007; Collins, Slembrouck & Baynham 2009; Blommaert 2010). In the next section, I will bring chronotopes and scales together and examine how they can contribute to a complexity-oriented, realistic account of context and contextualization which, in turn, affects our views of language and meaning.

4. **Chronotope, scale and context**

I propose to see chronotopes as that aspect of contextualization by means of which specific chunks of history can be invoked in discourse as meaning-attributing resources or, to refer to earlier terminology, as *historically configured and ordered “tropes”*. As for scales, I propose to see them as defining the *scope of communicability* of such tropes, and in line with what was argued earlier, we can also call this their scope of creativity (see Briggs 2005). Both are useful to distinguish between two dimensions of context and contextualization: that of the *availability* of specific contextual universes for invocation in discursive work (chronotope), and that of their *accessibility* for participants and audiences involved in discursive work (scale). These two dimensions, I have argued in earlier work, are essential sociolinguistic qualifications of discourse-analytic notions of “context”; contexts are actual and concrete resources for semiosis, and they are subject to differential distribution and inequality in rights-of-use (Blommaert 2005, chapter 3; see also Briggs 1997, 2005; Blommaert & Maryns 2002). Let me now clarify these points.

In its simplest form, chronotopes as historically configured tropes point us to the fact that specific complexes of “how-it-was” can be invoked as relevant context in discourse. Events,

acts, people and themes can be set and reset, so to speak, in different timespace frames, in such a way that the setting and resetting enable and prompt indexicals ordered as socioculturally recognizable sets of attributions. I am staying quite close to Bakhtin's chronotopic analyses here, where the invocation of a particular timespace (e.g. that of ancient Greek adventure stories) triggers an ordered complex of attributions that defines the plot (what can happen, and how), the actors (who can act, and how), the moral or political normative universes involved in what happens, the trajectories of plot and character development, and the effects of what happens. We get *generic types* (Bakhtin 1981: 251) or in Agha's terms, *figures* of personhood, of action, of sociopolitical values, of effect; and these figures are then performed through speech by means of indexicals – essentially random features which have now been ordered in such a way that they converge on the “figures” invoked by the particular timescale setting and create a logic of deployment and of expectation (Agha 2005: 39, 2011). The “type” is converted into recognizable “tokens”. To provide a trivial example, a narrative starting with “once upon a time” – the fairy tale genre trigger – prompts a timeless and geographically unidentifiable place in which princes, giants, witches, wizards and dwarfs can be expected alongside imaginary animals (dragons, unicorns) and animated objects (talking trees or moving rocks), with magic, a simple good-bad moral universe and a happy ending as expected features (“happy ever after”). Bakhtin argued that such chronotopic organization defined the specific genres we culturally recognize. All the features of such a fairy tale have been centered on indexical-ordering “figures”, and we follow the logic of performance by deploying them in the right order – a disruption of one feature (e.g. the “good prince” suddenly becoming ugly or arrogant) can disrupt the entire order.

Specific features can operate as *tropic emblems*, because they instantly invoke a chronotope as outlined above and bring chunks of history to the interactional here-and-now as relevant context. They invoke the “type” of which the actual enactment is a “token”. Thus, mentioning

“Stalin” can suffice to invoke a Cold War chronotope in which Stalinism equals the enemy and in which dictatorial, violent and totalitarian attributions define the “figure” of the Stalinist leader; images of Che Guevara can be used to reset (or “align”, to use Agha’s term) contemporary moments of social activism in an older historical lineage of left-wing rebellion, creating an indexical “pedigree” if you wish, very much in the way that “-isms” (“communism”, “liberalism”) do – it creates an endless *durée* and/or “stops time” by denying the relevance of intervening patterns of change and development (Lemon 2009).

Ethnic and ethnolinguistic labels can have such emblematic effect, invoking chronotopes of “tradition” not necessarily anchored in chronology or concrete historical facts, in which nationalist political-ideological positions, the moral righteousness of ethnic struggles, and essentializing attributes such as (pure) language or religion can be part of the ethnic “figure”. Woolard (2013) documents precisely that, in her study of how personal experiences related to Catalan identity and language are captured in three different chronotopes by different respondents, with different chronotopical positions being directed at (and contrasted in reference to) the emblematic notion of “Catalan”. We see how contesting the emblematic notion of “Catalan” (invoking the chronotope described above) is contested by means of different chronotopes framing what “Catalan” *actually means*, always with reference to the “typical” (or dominant) chronotope. Note how this play of chronotopes is *argumentative*: it creates apart from all the other effects already reviewed also an *epistemic-evaluative* effect of truth, importance and relevance. More on this in a moment.

The chronotopic organization of language as a field of experiential and political discourse proves to be an important part of the language-ideological apparatuses by means of which we decode our sociolinguistic lifeworlds and the ways in which we fit into them (Inoue 2004); Irvine (2004: 105) sees a deep connection between “ideologized visions of available genres and linguistic styles” (or registers) and temporalities motivating them as coherent frames; and

Eisenlohr (2004), in a perceptive paper, shows how such language-ideological temporalities underpin the construction of diasporic identities – with complex lines of affiliation to the Mauritian here-and-now and to a distant Indian past mediated through Hindi and Hindu ritualizations. Differences between “being from here” and merely “residing here” are articulated by invoking different historicities of origin, movement, stability and change. Contemporary forms of European nationalism place people’s “national” belonging in an unbroken line of unspoiled ethnolinguistic transmission reaching back into an unspecified past (the “empty time” of “ancestral” languages, Inoue 2004: 5) and see the contemporary usage of “pure” language (the institutionalized variety of it) as the contemporary normative enactment of that *durée* (Blommaert & Verschueren 1992; Silverstein 1996, 1998). This is a powerful trope, and the rupture of this lineage (for instance by colonization or totalitarianism) leading to language loss can be downplayed by nostalgic appeals to the *durée* of ideal unbroken transmission (“heritage”) combined, by absence of the “complete” language, with the emblematic display of small “typical” bits of the “ancestral” language (Cavanaugh 2004; Karrebaek & Ghandchi 2014; also Silverstein 1998; Moore 2012).

That last point brings us to issues of scales and accessibility. We have seen how chronotopes, as invokable “tropic” chunks of history, have powerful normative language-ideological dimensions. Their invocation and deployment comes down to a *mise en intrigue* in which persons, acts, patterns of development and assessments of value can be laid down.

Chronotopes are the stuff of Foucaultian discourses of truth, one could say. The delicate play of chronotopes, for instance in narrative, enables us to create epistemic and affective effects that *make sense* within the invoked context-of-use, and to strategize about outcomes in an argument (as Agha (1997) demonstrates in presidential debates). Knowledge of such invokable histories – their availability, in other words – is a cultural resource and an asset which allows us to construct, for precisely targeted effects, elaborate patterns of different

sociocultural materials in our discourses (e.g. Schiffrin 2009; Perrino 2011). Such knowledge makes us understandable.

Knowledge itself, however, is not enough; it makes us *understandable* but not necessarily *understood*. Available resources are not always accessible to all and differences in accessibility result in differences in meaning effect – misunderstanding, disqualification as irrelevant or untrue, “pointless” or “trivial”. Aspects of accessibility have a direct bearing on the scope of communicability: if I have access to the best possible and most widely understood (“typical”) resources, chances are that my words will be heard (as “tokens”) by many; if I lack access to such resources, I lack such chances (cf. Agha 2011). The issue of Bakhtinian “voice” is thus not just a matter of *what* exactly has gone into the actual voice, but also – and predicated on – *who* has the capacity to create voice, to be a creative meaning-maker in the eyes of others and who has access to the resources to make sense of these meanings (Hymes 1996; Wortham 2006; Agha 2011). I may have lived through important historical events – contexts available to me – but if I lack the actual resources for narrating these events in a way that makes their importance resonate with interlocutors – a matter of accessibility – I will probably end up talking to myself. The actual outcome of communication, thus, is an effect of the degrees of availability and accessibility of adequate contexts creatively invoked in discourse – of *chronotopes combined with scales*. And while the former is a cultural given, the second is a sociolinguistic filter on it.

Thus, trying to invoke a chronotope – e.g. the history of one’s country – requires access to the genred and enregistered features that index the genres of “historiography”. (Bakhtin, after all, was interested in the actual *forms* of time defining the novel.) In a long study on a Congolese painter who produced a grassroots-literate “History of Zaire” (Blommaert 2008), I explained why this document escaped the attention of professional historians (even when it was given, decades earlier, to a distinguished professional historian). Thsibumba, the author, had no

access to critical resources defining the genre: he lacked access to structured information (an archive) and had to rely on his own locally inflected memory; furthermore he lacked crucial literacy skills from the register of “historiography”. The effect was that his “History of Zaire” remained buried at the lowest scale of communicability: in the drawers of a single addressee, who could at best understand it as an anthropological artefact of restricted interest, but not a documentation of “History” to be communicated on the scale level Tshibumba aspired to: the world of professional historians. It took an anthropologist such as I to “upscale” his Histoire by re-entextualizing it for another audience; but that took a very significant amount of re-ordering work.

Scale, thus, is best seen as the scope of actual understandability of specific bits of discourse (Blommaert, Westinen & Leppänen 2015), and whenever we see chronotopes being invoked in discourse, we see them through the scalar effect of recognizability – that is, they can only be recognized by us when they have been performed by means of the register criteria their “type” presumes. And note that such recognitions can occur simultaneously at different scale levels, when different audiences recognize different indexical orders in the same discourse. That in itself tells us something about the author and the audience: their positions in the stratified sociolinguistic economy that produced the discourse, enabling access to the resources required to create meanings that communicate with different people. Bakhtin’s insistence on meaning as socially defined value derived from a stratified sociolinguistic system pushes us to this point: the historical analysis of novels, for Bakhtin, involved questions about how particular novels emerged out of particular social positions. We are capable now to add this mature sociolinguistic dimension to most of the interpretations of chronotope.

5. Timespace complexity

If we accept the preceding points, the analysis of meaning contains at least two sub-questions: (a) *what* do we understand? And (b) How come we understand it *as such*? To return to earlier remarks, answers to both questions will involve aspects usually called “micro-” as well as “macro-” contextual; and to the earlier definition of the total linguistic/semiotic fact we can now add that it is not just mediated by the fact of cultural ideology but also by the fact of sociolinguistic stratification. We will be confronted, in every actual example of discourse, by a complex construction of multiple historicities compressed into one “synchronized” act of performance, projecting different forms of factuality and truth, all of them ideologically configured and thus indexically deployed, and all of them determined by the concrete sociolinguistic conditions of their production and uptake, endowing them with a scaled communicability at each moment of enactment. These dense and complex objects are the “stuff” of the study of language in society (cf. Blommaert & Rampton 2011; Silverstein 2014).

Analysis of such objects must not seek to reduce their complexity but to account for it. Preceding developments in our field of study have dismissed the simple linear objects of linguistics as the (exclusive) conduits of meaning, and have replaced them by multiplex, layered, mobile and nonlinear – hence indeterminate and relatively unpredictable – objects which still demand further scrutiny in our quest for precision and realism. Part of that further scrutiny, I have suggested, is to imagine our object as shot through with different timespace frames provoking scaled meaning effects simultaneously understandable at different scale levels for different audiences, and continuing to do so long after they were effectively performed, with different effects at every moment of enactment.

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