Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper **91**

Michael Silverstein in conversation:

**Translatability and
the uses of standardisation**

with

Jef Van der Aa[©]*& Jan Blommaert*[©]
(Tilburg University)

J.vdrAa@tilburguniversity.edu
j.blommaert@tilburguniversity.edu

Michael Silverstein in conversation:

Translatability and the uses of standardisation

with

Jef van der Aa and Jan Blommaert

Michael Silverstein is the Charles F. Grey Distinguished Service Professor of Anthropology, of Linguistics, and of Psychology at the University of Chicago, and has played a central role in the development of contemporary US linguistic anthropology. At the first International Conference on Language and Superdiversity held at the University of Jyväskylä in June 2013, he gave a keynote lecture entitled "How Language Communities Intersect: Is 'superdiversity' an incremental or transformative condition? ", and in this wide-ranging conversation with Jef van der Aa and Jan Blommaert shortly before, he covers – among other things – translatability and the uses of standardisation.

Jef van der Aa: So welcome Michael Silverstein. There is this notion in linguistic anthropology of language as a cultural construct. Could you elaborate a little bit on that, to begin with?

Michael Silverstein: It's interesting that when we think about the way in which as linguistic anthropologists we investigate the phenomena of speech or of communication – let's say more generally cultural communication – in a variety of different places, it's always the case that no matter where in the world you go, there are certain kinds of regularities of semiosis, of using the sign system that focusses upon what we call language, let's say – that clearly involves the notion of what we call denotational meaning, i.e. people do have a notion of words for things – Wörter und Sachen as it were. So people really implicitly have such a notion. What they don't necessarily have on the other hand is a notion of a bounded system completely discrete from all other such bounded systems, with complete intertranslatability of the different forms for 'the same' denotational content. And they don't theorize that kind of thing. That is to say, you go around the world and you see that most cultures have a notion of what we might want to call communicational practice, and it's that communicational praxis of practice that gets variously understood.

My aboriginal friends in northwestern Australia, for example, the Worora people, had no idea what I was talking about, when in the beginning we were using a kind of Pidgin English called Creole as contact, they had no idea what I was talking about when I said 'What does that mean?' or 'How do you say…?' and giving them a kind of a quasi-English or Pidgin word in a 'how would you say that in your language' kind of thing. A few people who had been educated in the home entry education system knew that, but I'll come back to that if I may. What's so interesting is that the concept of giving an equivalent to something like English language or Creole meaning was not something that ever occurred to them. Or if I asked the other way round, hearing a word and saying – quoting that word – 'What does that mean?', I would get an answer like 'I would never say that in front of my mother's brother' – practice, practice, communicative practice. Words and expressions were really part and parcel of what they conceptualized as a culture of communicative practice.

What I fell upon soon in the course of fieldwork was much like what my friend Bob Dixon fell upon and talked about. For the language Dyirbal up in northeastern Australia, in Queensland, they had what was called a mother-in-law taboo register, a lexical register so

that there were ways that you could talk every day to everyone but your classificatory mother-in-law. (Mothers-in-law may be a universal about taboo behavior actually. Susan Ervin-Tripp, the Berkeley sociolinguist and social psychologist, invented the term 'no-naming', the metalinguistic term 'no-naming' for the practices of dealing with in-laws because people don't know whether to call them by first name, by kinship term, by last name.) So in front of your classificatory mother-in-law you use a completely disjoint set of vocabulary. So there are two different vocabularies. Lexical registers whose most salient quality is the quality of this cultural praxis. But once they understood that, then I said 'Okay, make believe, English is mother-in-law, how do you say this in '….'. So that's the way we induced a concept of translation and therefore a metalinguistic concept. So in a certain way I was transforming the culture of my interlocutors, of the people, with my consultants with whom I was working, because they just didn't have a concept of - our western philosophical concept ever since the Greeks actually – a western philosophical concept of words, concepts, things and so forth, as formalized within contemporary linguistic thought and philosophical thought. So the idea of what this communicative practice is based on may be in fact a whole cultural belief system that, for example, communication is something which is essentially and inherently contextualized, i.e. indexical as opposed to communication being something which rests upon a system of denotational structure…

Jan Blommaert: Correlations – one on one mappings.

MS: Yes, exactly – … with intertranslatability. So that's why in a very interesting way for a linguistic anthropologist – or it seems to be anybody who does sociolinguistic research or linguistic research even – in a cross-cultural environment, one has to be prepared for the fact that objects are not obvious – certainly not semiotic objects – and they are not obviously just inter-translatable at some kind of metalinguistic level which we can assume that everybody has. So if you don't have a notion of what we call now the semanticity of language, as a conceptual system that's applied to the world as it were,…

JvdA: So preceeding that idea of language as a cultural construct, there was an idea that one could elicit things explicitly …

MS: Precisely. It took a little bit of work, as you can see, to negotiate with the local people a little culture if you will – a culture of metalanguage – by which we could then understand each other, so that when I say 'What does that mean?', they'll tell me a translation equivalent, you see. But otherwise, without this notion, it was their system of understanding praxis, of contextualized usage, and that was their system of meaning. Now, I understand that that's exactly the case – the more you look carefully at Hindu theories of use of language, you also see that what you are talking about is a system of praxis, i.e. it's all about performativity, since 'understanding' in the philosophical system we're talking about, understanding is really being transformed in a very essential way. Communication is always performative and the notion that there is merely, if you will, a signans and a signatum, signifiant or signifié, sign vehicle and the concept, is really not what it is about.

JB: But let's make that idea a little bit more explicit because we're going to have to talk about superdiversity eventually. So when you say that you had to change the culture of these local people, you changed it by means of another culture, and you already hinted, that it's a culture in which we assume from within our tradition that this denotational structure is the structure of language. And also this idea of translatability. So, you, I, almost everyone here at this conference has been trained in a system in which we had to translate all the time. So, say, the stock, the books in our bags, every day at school included a dictionary and a grammar. So we assume that this was universal.

MS: Instruments of oppression! – they are, you know

JB: There seems to be an enormous belief in it because if you now look at Google Translate as a sort of apex of that idea, and then all the weird outcomes of Google Translate, all driven by this idea…. In a way this ought to lead to reflections on rules, because that idea of translatability and one-on-one relationships and so on, was also the idea that a language had to be learnt by means of studying rules: the rules of grammar, the rules of lexical appropriateness and what have you, exactly also translatability, the text was well translated or not, and so on.

MS: That was the philological way of teaching languages, sometimes called the deductive mode after the way in which Latin was taught. First you memorized the rules, then you looked at something that was the instantiation, the instances of the rules, and then there was the alternative… What's so remarkable is that the alternative – sometimes called the inductive mode – was just the opposite. You started with the instances and, with a sufficient number of them, you could say someone would do (what we call in psychology) 'stimulus generalization' and would say 'Ah, the rule I can extract must be such and such'. So it's just the opposite of the first but it never gets outside of that system.

So the interesting thing you see – what we are faced with – is the fact that you don't want to <u>deny</u> that there is some kind of systematicity to language as a system of denotation. There is a certain gloriousness of the field of formal linguistics in which you can say: 'okay, there is a component of languaging' – let's call the practice 'languaging' – 'there is a component of the practices of languaging which clearly involves the kinds of things where we can say: the subject, the syntactic phrase must precede the predicating phrase or vice versa', or these kinds of things. Those kinds of formalisms clearly have gotten us a lot of mileage as scientists of structure. You don't want to throw them out because they have in fact been useful, even for making predictions which is the most important sort of thing if you look at it from a kind of scientific epistemology. But the vast majority of languaging falls outside of that. So you want to realize, it seems to me, that <u>our</u> scientific view of denotational structure, however correct or incorrect it may be – and of course if it is a scientific stance you're taking, you are always prepared to say 'Oh, I guess I was wrong', 'it doesn't work' or something like that – you always have to be ready for that. But let's say to a certain extent it gives us a good understanding of certain aspects of language as a formal structure of science – what I call the hypothesis of denotationality...

JB: Which in itself is a cultural construct.

MS: Indeed, but it happens to be a fortunate one that the western philosophical and grammatical tradition fell upon or discovered somehow, and it gives us a certain insight even on the language of the folks in Australia that I was talking about. See, that's what's interesting. They don't have to know that they're doing verbs before subjects – but they are, I mean from the point of this view of language. But the vast majority of semiosis that is centered on language is in fact not that. You see, that's what's so interesting. That view of language has of course been most successful in the emergence of what we would call the Enlightenment project of breaking apart the medieval trivium. That is to say, you keep grammar and logic, and you think of semantics – the way language stands for things – as being truth-functional, and of course you get symbolic logic, you get semantic theories for almost everything and so on.

JB: A pure and objective, a sort of notational, system.

MS: Absolutely. And it's wonderful for the Google people because computers are based upon this view of language as a formal system.

JB: That's why we get these weird outcomes in Google translate.

MS: Fabulously amusing translations. I mean, machine translation is something, as you know, that has been going on since shortly after the Second World War. Of course, there

were computers which took up an entire building, but they were necessary to do this (rather than a little android). But in any case, what is so interesting is that there has been a kind of culture – here again we come to a cultural system – there has been a kind of functional interlocking of the emergence of formal views of denotational systems and the invention of artificial intelligence based upon exactly the computational concreteness of this mode of algorithm.

JB: Seen very often as one of the big victories of formal linguistics.

MS: Absolutely. Great victory – and then in a certain sense it is, if it drives your machines properly. And vice versa, if your machines therefore become instrumentalized in a cultural system in which they can help you do that kind of stuff – as hilarious as that sometimes turns out. But it's all still part of, in fact, a cultural system that has an institutionalization, the realization as an institution, that works absolutely in concert. But what about everything else that goes on in languaging!

JB: What you describe is a legacy that is very much everywhere. I mean every language teacher basically is entirely soaked with that sort of idea. Here is a problem and I would like to hear your view on this. We have been raised with the idea that the only form of rule or law or structure is at the level of grammar. Now you say that performativity is the key to understanding what language is and does and means and so on. Many of these school teachers or language planners or whatever would say 'Yes, but that is a field of chaos. There are no rules. This is just improvisation. People just fool around'.

MS: Well, here we go back, as I said, to the enlightenment project, because once you can identify what is rule-governable – not necessarily rule-governed but rule-governable – as the locking together of grammar and logic, that is to say, as grammatical form, signans, the significant, and logic as the signifié as it were, propositional meaning – and set that apart from what used to be called rhetoric…

JB: Indeed, which was effect-governed.

MS: Effect-governed, intentional, agentive, aesthetic. …and you start saying 'Hey, wait a minute, that's everything else we do with communication, that's what we mean when we talk about the cultural aspect of semiosis, of communication. Who studies that? Can it be brought under rule?'

JB: Exactly. 'Can you teach it like the rules of grammar are the rules of performance?'

MS: Yes exactly. So I love watching in my class teaching when we get to talking about the use of tu and vous or all the equivalents in all the other European languages: Du and Sie, tu and vous, tú and usted. You know, all those… And I firstly point out: oh look, the Worora do that. They have a Sie-form, third person plural which you use when you are addressing your wife-givers, i.e. the people who are classificatory father and brother of the classificatory wife. You speak Sie-talk to them. I mean, obviously what you are doing here is what the sociologist Shils would call a little act of deference in exactly this way. The Yokuts of Central California – an indigenous American group of people – spoke in the dual. They have a three-number system: singular, dual. They spoke in the dual when they spoke to an in-law.

JB: So many have it.

MS: So many have it. There is a kind of universal here in terms of the formal displacement from singular to something else, whether it's increased number or shifting to the third person or something like that. So firstly, these people are absolutely flabbergasted. 'You mean, savages… do the same kind of thing? And you mean, they never travel to France to learn this?' So, that's the one thing I very much like to point out, firstly. And secondly of course I asked people: 'Okay, who here took Spanish or Italian or German or French in

high school? What did your teacher tell you?'. And it turns out of course that the teachers, who are desperate to formulate an airtight inviolable rule of pragmatics, desperate to do so, concoct…

JB: Very often in the form of a classroom hierarchy: 'You address me with vous'.

MS: Indeed. But I mean, the crucial thing is that they concoct the most fabulous stories about what it is, why people do this, rather than simply saying, 'well what it is, is a performative index'. It's a performative index that as an act of deference creates a particular kind of social relationship.

JB: And these indexes are ordered. They are not random.

MS: Absolutely. They are not random etc. So, what's so interesting, of course, is that indeed as you say, these matters of what used to be called rhetoric are really the matters of speaking in a contextually subtle and – both appropriate but more importantly even something like using tu and vous – in a contextually effective way, because in pragmatics of course the crucial point is that what is said always does something, as Austin of course realized but did not have the linguistic anthropological machinery, you might say, to really effectively analyse and tell us about.

JvdA: Do you have any ideas on what would need to change in order for these other things to come into the classroom, into teaching?

MS: That's a big order. It seems to me that people have been trying for years to bring a certain sophistication about communication and semiotics into teaching teachers, into the preparation of teachers for example, sensitivity to what… Let us say, if linguists know about denotational structures – and are experts in denotational structures – no one I think has much realized that there are also experts in languaging. You sometimes hear it talked about in the United States, at least, as cultural sensitivity in the use of language or something like that. But, again, that doesn't amount to very much, because in fact what you're trying to do is graft onto this understanding of language – that is, onto our cultural form that I was talking about before, that is a denotational system in structure – you're trying to graft on to that: 'okay, but be sensitive about context', rather than starting the other way round.

JvdA: So it's easily treated as non-central?

MS: Absolutely. When I teach language in culture, for example, I start out with ritual poetics and then move to everyday poetics of interaction, and then I talk about performativity as a very specialized case within the western philosophical and linguistic tradition, and then I get to talk about signifiant and signifié. Then I get to talk about denotation. I say: 'Oh, and by the way, denotation lies…' and so on.

JB: There is really a distance between the phenomenon and the sort of dogmatic explanations.

MS: I think of it as peeling away the layers of an onion, until you get to one part of it that has been so wildly successful in European culture (well I include of course North America). In European culture this has been wildly successful, and so most of our understanding of language is of course a culturally specific understanding of languages, as we were saying before, but it's from that very narrow cultural construction of what language is that people then desperately try to build out rather than starting from the totality and saying 'what are all the pieces, what are all the partials?' and so forth. And I think what's so interesting about the contemporary situation of plurilinguism and pluri… (I don't know even how to put it, pluri-semioticism, you might say), the condition under which inevitably everyone lives through the globalization of at least some strands of

cultures that move around, is that people are interested in understanding these things with a machinery, it seems to me, that is ill-equipped to deal with it.

JB: Exactly. One example is of course the whole debate about the decay of the standards of language in schools.

MS: Oh yes – the decay of standards: 'The young people don't speak well anymore'.

JB: 'They don't speak, they can't write, they don't read'.

MS: Yes. 'Oh, they can't do anything', you know. And of course, if you look at the fabulously sophisticated modalities that these kids…

JB: And if you go through history, every generation appears to say exactly the same.

MS: That's what standardization is about. That's precisely what's…

JB: Language must have been quite something in the eighteenth century if since everything…

MS: Well, imagine what it was in the Garden of Eden!

JB: It's been really something!

MS: Really something, yes!

JB: But the thing is, very often my own response to that is, if they say 'You know, the standards, there's a big problem, so we need more grammar, we need more stability basically, and rigor in the teaching, and down with the communicative method' and what have you, but my answer is very often: 'no, we're observing change. We're witnessing change, you see, a change in standards, for instance a multiplication of standards'. Then again, from that historical sort of linguistic viewpoint that you sketched, that's impossible to deal with, because we know that the rules of grammar are relatively slowly changing, you know, they are a very sort of resilient bit although there is change, but the social rules of course can change in a matter of weeks, months, years. They change all the time.

MS: Yes, precisely. There is that wonderful quip by the late Winston Churchill that the Americans and the Britons are one people separated only by language. What he meant of course was precisely the fact that the Americans and Britons are part of a single linguistic community but that from the point of view of the cultural implementation of language in actual practice, they are very highly divergent.

JB: Maybe these notions need to be specified. A linguistic community would be a community that believes that they speak the same language or that they speak a particular language?

MS: Yes, a linguistic community is the projection of this denotational structural view of language. Whether people have a sense – as they all do – of what we would call the fact that the language exists in multiple registers, that there are multiple ways of, if you will, saying the same thing that are contextually appropriate, nevertheless in their communicative behaviour with each other, they presume upon the fact that there must be some kind of contextually inflected norm for denotation. 'That group of people'. And notice: it must be a degree term, with people who are more central to these communities and people who are going to be more peripheral.

JB: The notional speaker – we'll get to that – good speakers, bad speakers.

MS: Good. So, projecting that into a population, that carves out a fuzzy-edged but nevertheless reasonable notion of what a linguistic community is all about, or a language community. By contrast, of course, these cultural systems… Boas after all spent almost his entire professional career saying 'language, race and culture are three different things

that don't coincide'. We keep forgetting it. Why do we keep forgetting it? We keep forgetting it, I really think, because we live in a cultural system which constantly tries to bring them back together again, racializing language difference, languaging racial difference, culturalizing linguistic difference.

JB: Absolutely. Degrees of being a speaker or, let's say, degrees of fluency and of, let's say, objective life chances like getting citizenship or getting jobs and things like that. It's a big system.

MS: On the one hand, you have the linguistic community, or a language community, which you can look at from the point of view of the orientation of a people to – how they presume upon – a norm of denotation. On the other hand you can look at their cultural behavior, and you can see that all these other semiotic components of language that we still want to call language, I think – at least I do, I think you do – that all these other components of language are really essentially sociocultural in nature.

JB: …changeable, learned in different ways…

MS: … all these kinds of things, and also, like so many cultural forms in the contemporary experience that we have, constantly malleable, both on a face to face basis but more importantly on a mediatized, mediated basis – mediatized in the sense of relying upon mass media as modes of becoming familiar with them, so we can become partially familiar with things...

JB:… and lose it again

MS: … and lose it again, and all this stuff gets mixed and matched in interesting kinds of ways. And it looks like the same linguistic material, so that it's very worrisome to people who are worried about standards, you see. It's very worrisome and I could imagine that people are frightened about this stuff.

JB: And for very good reasons because it really has effects. You already mentioned the notion of register a couple of times. Standard – would that be a register?

MS: Yes. Standard is a register but, you know the late Max Weinreich's wonderful quip which was originally in Yiddish: 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy'. Leonard Bloomfield, the American linguist, in 1927 wrote about literate and illiterate speech, where he said that for the vast majority of people in the European West (what we now call the First World or the North, whatever), nothing could be a language that did not have a written form. Hence illiterates speak only dialect. And in fact people come up to me all the time when they hear that I do language things at cocktail parties and things, and they say 'How many dialects did the native Americans speak?' and I say 'Well, dialects of what?'. I always say 'Dialects of…? Which language are you talking about?' – 'There were languages?!'

JB: Well, in our part of the world the big debate is about the disappearance of dialects, these wonderful eco-linguistic phenomena that we used to have, these farmers talking in weird ways, they're disappearing.

MS: Oh yes, that's romantic nostalgia.

JB: Of course there are new dialects being created all the time.

MS: Constantly. I mean, romantic nostalgia is an old and perduring European trait, is it not? After all, how was Landsmål created in Norway, other than for the rural nostalgia and also as a kind of thumbing of the nose against the Dane or Norwegian elites.

JB: Maximum separation.

MS: Yes, maximum separation. But two things, it seems to me, are in play here. Firstly is the more general notion of a register. We now look at it again in terms of a socio-cultural process. We label it enregisterment, and things are always moving into enregisterment and out of enregisterment. That is to say, a register is really an abstract… it's a scheme of valid co-occurrence, of different forms that distinguishes for people a style or a way of speaking in context. It might be a style or a way of speaking of some particular kind of person, or it might be a thing like 'when in church you speak this way'- kind of thing. So it could be contextual in that way as well. But the crucial point is that registers are organized according to different degrees of salience and even stereotypic consciousness. Once someone starts speaking, perhaps the way I'm speaking using lots of polysyllabic words, it's suddenly salient. So for example years and years ago – I'm talking about twenty something years ago – I walked into my local supermarket and was asking the man behind the fish counter about various things, and he said 'You're a professor, aren't you?'. You see. So register is really, firstly, learning certain things that are salient or coherent. We talk about honorific registers, for example, or taboo-registers like the mother-in-law language I was talking about. All of those are quite highly salient kinds of enregistered differentiations, different ways of denotationally saying the same thing. And then there is lots of other stuff that goes along with it. And very oftentimes that people are completely unaware of.

JB: But that are actually again very salient – meaning normative – and compelling even.

MS: Totally normative, as cultural practices totally normative and totally interpretable by one's interlocutors.

JvdA: So what do you think makes particular things like romanticized dialects, lodged in that enregisterment process, stay there. You said they move in but what makes them actually stay there

MS: Absolutely. The late John Gumperz, it seems to me, in his couple of papers on what he called the 'speech community' – meaning I think the linguistic community, at least in part – talked about two poles of sociolinguistic variation. On the one hand, there was what he called 'dialectal variation', again a kind of romantic notion that dialects were like varieties of a species, and over the land, language spreads, and as it spreads it differentiates into dialects, as it were, or into what Labov investigates, 'sociolects' (insofar as the sociolects are in a certain way not yet cultural forms, but there is differentiation so you can measure frequencies of how often people pronounce a particular phonetic variant, or something like that, and you can parcel that out with a correlation to different people, what he called the 'sociolinguistic indicators' – another word for index). But what's interesting then is that Gumperz – to go back to his differentiation – also talks about superposed variability. Now, that's variability which again Labov talks about in terms of 'sociolinguistic markers'. They are ones that people begin to have a kind of consciousness of the salience of them, and they can be used indexically in a creative way to create an impression. Here we come back to the romantic notion as you were saying – 'I can speak real country-talk', 'I can index my essence as being really…'

JB: …or 'my endangered language'.

MS: Well, there's that, too… Yes, the endangered dialect.

JvdA: And it goes well with the nationalist wave in Europe at the moment.

MS: Absolutely, and even regionalist, I might add, for example, Occitanian, which doesn't have a state form. And that is of course – again when you contrast it with the Enlightenment view of denotational structures that we were talking about before – that's why it becomes so dangerous, because anybody who speaks an emergently superposed and

enregistered form of a language is automatically somebody who could be another ethnè, another ethnic group and therefore a stateless nation.

JB: …or somebody who pollutes the language and forces the standards to drop.

MS: Yes, that too of course. You have to be aware of intermixture and so forth.

JB: …like 'obscene language' on TV and things like that, polluting the minds of people.

MS: Pollution, as you know, is another anthropological universal… There are modes of polluting almost anything in a socio-culturally appropriate way – or non-appropriate as it were. But what's so interesting, you see, is that dialects, in the sense of the ecological spread and differentiation of language, can become enregistered, and therefore in Gumperz's sense, the variability becomes superposed, where people use it now as a cultural system to mark identities, to mark all kinds of things. So then we get into a special kind of register which has emerged, indeed, as a function of the emergence of the modern nation-state. Read Benedict Anderson and you see how clearly these two things are related. The creation of an explicitly enregistered form that consists of – as you said before – a constantly if slowly changing set of prescriptions ('what you must say') and proscriptions ('what you dare not say'). And it's a Foucauldian form of control over our language, it's a form of governmentality, in which institutions of society, often not explicitly or primarily the state, but institutions in the public sphere which in a certain sense operate for the state. So print-culture, for example, was one of the massive modes of standardization in that sense; mass media take over the job of print-culture in many contexts and so forth; and of course the most massive – frequently indeed government-sponsored – institution, education, in which you beat everything but standard register out of the little things.

JB: And increasingly immigration, of course, all over Europe – it's about language testing, it's about 'do you have enough of it yet?'

MS: That's right. And that's what's so extraordinary – that standard register becomes, in that sense, commoditized as identity becomes commoditized and essentialized: 'Are you Dutch enough yet?'

JB: It's all about enoughness.

MS: Yes. Enoughness – same thing. Look, in the American south, there used to be literacy tests for African American people to be able to vote. The literacy tests consisted of whether or not they could read an arbitrarily pointed-to section of the US Constitution – I don't know if you have ever seen this eighteenth-century legal language – and interpret it for them, explain it in plain standard. I mean, talk about a system of biased dispreference on which a system of social stratification is maintained! So standards on the one hand were really a central instrument of the emergence of the modern nation-state, starting in Europe and then, as Anderson points out, exported through colonial projects, imperial projects all over the world. And now everybody wants a standard language.

JB: And now even as a market commodity, you can buy American accent. You can buy a corporate register of 50 words a week or something.

MS: Yes. I've written about that… all of the people who are only too willing to sell you what we would call linguistic snake-oil.

JB: You also mentioned... at some point you used the term 'indexical Viagra'.

MS: Yes, indexical Viagra. You know, you want to be right on top of things, so to speak, in every possible way. So there is a sense, then, in which standards are a central vehicle of the emergence of nation-states, with a local European, or Euro-centric, concept of different languages. And without standardization, people can't imagine that there could be a language. So standard register gets confused with the existence of denotational norms, and

all the indexical variation (in terms of the massively complex forms of communication) gets reduced to 'Are you speaking a standard or aren't you? And if you're not, how can you possibly be mixing that stuff in?' And so forth. It becomes commodifiable.

JB: And 'how can you function in society?'

MS: 'How can you function in society' is another way of saying 'We have gate-keeping tests for you. We will keep you out. And this is the price you must pay'. It's what the economists call an 'opportunity cost'. This is the opportunity cost for advancement in a particular way. Now, to recognize this is not necessarily to say 'Therefore it's all evil'. It's a social system. It's the way in which this particular social system operates. But to the degree to which the communicative phenomena, the cultural semiosis, even in the First World, no longer is containable by these now hokey, quaintly stupid, ideas which are really our European patrimony of language…

JB: That's what superdiversity means basically

JvdA: Reminds me of certain political parties where we're from

MS: Well to be sure, political parties embrace this because language has always been at the center of the way in which politics and the political economy are structured within our mode of having nation-states. So it's a very interesting lock-together set of ideas there. Some of them are useful for certain purposes but ultimately indeed, as you were saying, the very concept of superdiversity, it seems to me, emerges from a recognition of how desperate the institutional forms that operate on the basis of the assumption of the 'one language, one linguistic community, one nation-state'…

JB: … and also 'one perfect speaker'. So all of that in your mind or in your brain or…

MS: …all of that lies behind as a cultural system… and the harder that has to work to try to contain what's going on now, and the more therefore it's going to fail unless brutal measures are taken

JB: … and they are

MS: … So, as I was saying, there is a descriptive way in which we can recognize as social scientists the elaborate structure here that has emerged around language or languaging, the praxis of communication. And we can recognize even with a clear eye its stratifying effects, its exclusionary effects, all these kinds of things, as well as of course on the other side, the fact that there are people who are in the club and they feel just terrific about it, so it has, as it were, enhancing qualities for those other folks.

JB: Of course, the more oppressive you make that stuff, the smaller that club of people who are in becomes, because everything becomes an exception, a deviation.

MS: So here it seems to me we really do have to make an ethical or moral decision about whether or not we're not just going to be social scientists in this descriptive sense, and in the theoretical sense of saying 'oh, isn't this interesting that these phenomena work similarly here and here and here' and so forth. We have to sort of say 'okay, how about if you're a citizen scientist'. Boas was. As you were saying, the more oppressive this becomes, the smaller the club which has a membership.

JB: Exactly. Or even if you are a member of the club, the higher the risk that at some point you will transgress some rule and be kicked out or sidelined. So we're entering the nature of linguistic marginalization.

MS: There is a scandalous story about my own teacher, Jakobson, who was at a party at Eric Hamp's house decades and decades ago, when Roman was visiting and giving a talk in Chicago. And the local Russian professor, who actually was a Sanscritist trained by Edgerton, was like Trubetskoy a knyaz – Professor Bobrinsky, a knyaz, a duke, a prince of

the first collaterality. And apparently Roman made a mistake in terms of highest csarist White-Russian standard, in some linguistic form, and from across the room the knyaz corrected him. So, look at the risk!

JB: There you go. We can always try to abnormalize that, or let's say orientalize that – those are the weird Russian aristocrats of the early twentieth century – but it's very much around, isn't it.

MS: I say to my students all the time: 'now that I've revealed to you the entire massive machinery of socio-linguistic oppression, of stratification around the standard and so on, that will not stop me from correcting your papers because my institution is at the highest pinnacle of what you might want to call the oppressive regime'.

JB: Absolutely. And at the same time – maybe this could be a useful conclusion of this conversation – at the same time it proves also that there is no absence of norms, there is no shortage of norms even in a sociocultural organization of language. Normativity is everywhere.

MS: Yes, exactly. Indeed there are norms even of these other components, these non-denotational components as we were saying. They're understood in terms of a folk system of enregisterment, but there's lots of other variation as well that people are actually behaving in terms of and working in terms of. But this one particular, massively complex system – to which indeed the aspiration of working under the umbrella of superdiversity responds – is indeed a complex one in which people confuse standard register with normativity in the first place, and they confuse language with denotational structure. So all of these sorts of things that we've taken decades and decades to pull apart, at least so that they become visible to us as students of languaging, as it were get collapsed into one. And most importantly and – as you pointed out – most tellingly, they become instruments of oppression and stratification.

JB: At the individual level.

MS: At the individual level, through various kinds of institutionalized forms so that you are summoned as a citizen-scientist to say: 'Where do I stand on using my knowledge to, as it were, maybe illuminate people, maybe reveal what's going on.'

JB: At least show what's going on. That's the least we can do.

MS: That's the least we can do. There is a wonderful scene in the 1939 Hollywood movie 'The Wizard of Oz' in which…

JB: 'The witch is dead'

MS: no no it's not that the witch is dead

JB: … a hit a few weeks ago when Margaret Thatcher died

MS: that's a different story! Leave the Baroness out of this… there is this wonderful scene in which Toto – the little dog of Dorothy – pulls back a curtain when you see the mountebank, the snake-oil salesman, working the levers of the machine that's running this thing which supports to be Oz. And we can certainly try to be that little Toto.

JB: So on that note thank you very very much, Michael.

MS: Well it's always a pleasure to talk to you guys!