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Commentary:

Superdiversity old and new

by

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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.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, superdiversity, ethnography, language ideologies, community, social structure, nation-state.

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

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[1] The papers are: Michael Silverstein, "How language communities intersect: Is superdiversity an incremental or transformative condition?"; Robert Moore, "From revolutionary monolingualism to reactionary multilingualism: Top-down discourses of linguistic diversity in Europe, 1794-present"; Paja Faudree: "Singing for the dead on and off line: Diversity, migration and scale in Mexical *Muertos* music"; Marcy Brink-Danan: "What you can say in London will get you arrested in New York: Two cities along diversity's discourse itinerary"; Becky Schulties: "Do you speak Arabic? Axes of adequation and difference in pan-Arab talent programs"; Marco Jacquemet, "Asylum and superdiversity: The search for denotational

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.

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 & 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.

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 & 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 & 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 emergence of the language ideology trend in the early nineties important critical work emerged in quantities (e.g. Bauman & Briggs 2003; Agha 2007). The influence of this work on the emergence of language and superdiversity as a space for synthetic work is a matter of record (see for instance Blommaert & Rampton 2011). The fact that this new linguistic anthropology generated possibilities for a new and more analytically powerful linguistic ethnography was effectively a factor of tremendous importance (see e.g. Rampton 2007).

I see, in that sense, less of a European-American divide in addressing diversity as a field of inquiry than does Marcy Brink-Danan in her discussion of the diverse traditions of "diversity

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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.

discourse"; I shall return to this towards the end of my remarks. Sociolinguistic superdiversity, I firmly believe (and had occasion to witness), could not have emerged as a productive perspective without the intense transatlantic dialogue among sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists of the past two decades. In this dialogue, a space of theoretical work emerged in which 'exceptional' forms of language were increasingly seen as privileged lenses through which a different gaze on *all of language* became possible. In other words: starting from exceptionally 'unusual' language often set in contemporary contexts of emergence, 'normal' language present as well as past also began to look different. And as soon as questions emerging from superdiverse contexts were projected onto contexts not often associated with it, the empirical scope of language and superdiversity dramatically broadened, and the field became paradigmatic, a different perspective by means of which *all* facts of language could be redefined and re-analyzed.[4]

I firmly believe that the domain of language and superdiversity has a range of specific *objects* – think of online communication and its hugely complex semiotic forms (about which more shall be said later). Obviously, such objects are new: the internet did not exist when Gumperz and Hymes compiled their *Directions in Sociolinguistics* (1972). Specific forms of urban multilingualism, now also shot through with traces of a globalized pop culture, are also new and could be called specific 'superdiverse' sociolinguistic objects (e.g. Rampton 1995). I also firmly believe that the change of knowledge infrastructure – the internet and contemporary popular culture – is often underestimated as a factor of fundamental change (cf. Burke 2000), and that, consequently, we should not too quickly dismiss new e-phenomena as merely a re-enactment of phenomena already known and understood. A change in knowledge infrastructure is a change in the entire economy of knowledge, and even if things look the same linguistically (i.e. in terms of formal qualities), they can have a very different *sociolinguistic* role, distribution and function. Superdiversity is primarily a *sociolinguistic* issue, as Silverstein's contribution to this collection makes abundantly clear. Having said this, the range of specifically "superdiverse" objects is limited, and their uniqueness as phenomena is still (and will remain for a while) a topic of debate.

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[4] A contemporaneist interpretation of the sociolinguistic superdiversity project is therefore deeply flawed; it narrows its scope to the small range of new objects to be discussed in what follows, and overlooks its wider revisionist and reformulating effects – instantiated in this collection by Michael Silverstein and Rob Moore.

What is truly new, therefore, is the paradigmatic perspective and not the "superdiverse" new objects. It is the perspective that enables us not just to analyze the messy contemporary stuff, but also to re-analyze and re-interpret more conventional and older data, now questioning the fundamental assumptions (almost inevitably language-ideological in character) previously used in analysis. It's a new theoretical approach to language in society, a new key in which sociolinguistics can be played.[5] And since it is an approach that starts from what earlier was seen as 'exceptional', it will explain exceptions better than the theory that produced these exceptions. The fact, therefore, that there is only a small set of phenomena that can be called specifically 'superdiverse', does not reduce the usefulness of the theoretical intervention: recall that Quantum theory did not replace Newtonian physics, it just explained its exceptions, but in so doing it recast the foundations for an understanding of vastly more. It also did not need a new universe for that: the universe was exactly the same for Isaac Newton and Niels Bohr; the understanding of the universe changed, not its existence. There is of course no reason to extend this analogy or take it too literally; but the comparison can show us the usefulness of new perspectives on old issues, how such perspectives can 'renew' the old issues, explain some of their previously inexplicable aspects, and so bring a very broad range of issues within their purview – Silverstein's paper, with his creative reanalyses of e.g. Chinook Jargon, can again serve as an exemplum here.

The papers in this collection contribute to this reformulating exercise, and in so doing they add precision to questions that become increasingly pressing in light of the changing (or *un*changing) sociolinguistic realities and regimes we experience. I will select, in what follows, two areas of particular interest: the way in which the papers in this collection add to our understanding of contemporary power in the sociolinguistic field, specifically the role of the state: and the questions that emerge from the papers regarding the nature and structure of sociolinguistic communities past and present.

Key issues: the anachronistic state

We first need to address issues of power and authority. The opening paper of this volume, by Michael Silverstein, already identifies what is, to me, the most critical issue in sociolinguistic superdiversity at present: the increasingly problematic relationship between language

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[5] Precursors are plenty. To mention just one: Gumperz and Hymes equally qualified their ethnography of communication as a *perspective* and did a remarkable job of reformulation and reorientation in the introduction to their *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, integrating rather profoundly different approaches (e.g. those of Labov and Bernstein) into their project.

communities and speech communities, mediated by the present nation-state infrastructure. Note, evidently, that this role of the state is not just problematic *now* – see Rob Moore's discussion of the hegemonizing project of the French Revolution; we are able to bring a new set of questions to this issue, and the papers in this volume define such questions.

"Seeing as a state" (a term Silverstein borrows from James C. Scott) appears an increasingly myopic endeavor because the abnormal and marginal – the sociolinguistics of the peripheries – have become normal and everyday features of sociolinguistic life in robust metropolitan nation-states. To quote Silverstein's conclusion (this volume):

> "But these problems have come home to roost, as it were, in the historical present of Europe and North America, where we need to move on from thinking about language communities to thinking about speech – or discursive – communities as the phenomena which nation-states in particular must be made to see – and hear – and to respect."

I would argue that these problems might have always been home in some form or shape, but that an increasingly sensitive and sophisticated detection of their actual problematic presence (in courtrooms, emergency hospital wards, schools and immigration offices) has brought them to roost. Marco Jacquemet's clinical dissection of the sociolinguistic issues surrounding asylum applications in Europe (this volume; cf. also Maryns 2006, Blommaert 2009) shows that this roosting, unfortunately, may take a while: obvious and manifestly critical facts of sociolinguistic diversity, now made methodologically visible, are received in an administrative-legal system which (increasingly) expresses a strong belief in the denotational transparency of what is said and written by asylum applicants. The issue is "content", linguistically articulated through a known "language" that unambiguously locates its speaker in or outside an existing nation-state – a key element in deciding the validity of an asylum application. One could add to this that the current enthusiasm for high-tech "solutions" – from automatic translation engines to big data mining – do not in any way promise improvement but, on the contrary, appear to strengthen the belief in the "objectivity" of carefully parsed and counted denotational "content".

Nation-states have organized themselves into supranational institutions – Jaquemet's paper already illustrates this. While stimulating intensified mobility as well as a degree of "cosmopolitan" (postnational) self-imagination among segments of the population, this scale-jump has not resulted in a questioning of the basic institutional and administrative imagery of

the nation-state. Rob Moore's paper, and especially his discussion of the EU official stance on multilingualism, serves as a powerful and eloquent case in point. The texts he discusses, drafted by selected European "(wo)men of letters", are profoundly polyphonic. One hears, on the one hand, reflections grounded in a more or less sensible and realistic sociology of the present in which at least one element of the perfect European's linguistic repertoire, the Personal Adoptive Language (PAL), can be seen as serving that often overlooked third space in between the private and the public sphere – the sphere of personal informal social relations, of interests and orientations that are neither inspired by a purely individual drive nor by the prescriptions and proscriptions of the Law, but emerge out of the socially structured confluence of individual biographies in the shape of pleasures, desires, attention given to topics, domains and groups of people (the space of speech communities, one could say). On the other hand, one hears statements directly reflecting "seeing as a State": the compelling convergence experienced by European nation-states as the only possible answer to an escalating sociological diversity, and organized around a classical notion of the language community – a "Locke-ocracy" in Silverstein's terms. The motive of pleasure, elsewhere mentioned as the reason for choosing a specific PAL, is here corrected, so to speak, so as to please the hegemonies of the state. The immigrants' PALs, for instance, must be the national language of their host country and the PALs chosen by other Europeans must be picked from the list of official EU languages. The space of speech communities is fine as long as it coincides with the space of language communities.

Moore's paper, added to Jacquemet's, can serve as an important corrective to interpretations of the postnational ("superdiverse") condition as an era of unrestricted Bakhtinian carnival, with people freely exploiting the range of identity options and features currently on offer.[6] If sociolinguistic superdiversity research has demonstrated anything so far, it is the problematic interaction between a field of sociocultural diversity and various forms of policing, surveillance and control curtailing options within that field and producing new forms of

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[6] I am grateful to Ben Rampton for offering this formulation. It should be clear that I fail to see the grounds for Marcy Brink-Danan's assertion that "European" sociolinguistic superdiversity work uses a "neoliberal" and "individualistic" concept of diversity. Exactly the contrary is the case: it is the regimes of surveillance and control – take the Common European Framework for Languages as an example, or the forms of "linguistic expertise" deployed in asylum application cases discussed by Jacquemet – that install such neoliberal and individualistic categories at the heart of the state system. Work on sociolinguistic superdiversity in Europe has consistently dislodged these language-ideological assumptions; reading the concluding chapters in Rampton (1995), knowing that it provoked an entire cottage industry of critical work, should suffice to notice that.

structural inequality adding to older ones (cf. Arnaut 2012; Blommaert 2010, chapter 6; Blommaert, Leppänen & Spotti 2012). The postnational state is bloody strong and effective – just ask asylum seekers when in doubt.

It is the latter voice – that of the enforced and policed language community as a tool for countering the centrifugal forces detected in the infinite and unpredictable birth and growth of speech communities – that connects the current EU vision to that of French Revolution Jacobinism, according to Moore. It creates, thus, at the core of the EU nation-building project, a fundamental anachronism reminiscent of the one that Marx famously described in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*: a state whose structure reflects an older sociocultural order of power and authority attempting to rule a society in which an entirely different order is developing – a tension that makes the state obsolete at every moment of its existence and forces it into a perpetual (and hopeless) search for legitimacy. In Silverstein's terms, "the phenomenal shit, as it were, has really hit the fan", and an imagery of language communities competing for legitimacy or even dominance in an apparently unified public sphere is now met by analyses of stratified and overlapping speech communities in a polycentric social sphere. It is an unhappy and highly problematic meeting.

The nature and structure of such speech communities, however, demands further inspection, and this brings me to a second key issue.

Key issues: communities

Superdiversity is only partly a demographic issue; it is not the new flows of people and their concentration in urban and peri-urban metropoles across the globe, that decide the case for superdiversity; the issues are *qualitative* and revolve around questions such as the formation of "communities" – the scare quotes around the term will soon be clarified – across vast timespaces (forcing us to consider scales as fundamental descriptive instruments) and connected by technologies for long-distance communication and knowledge circulation. It is the connection, historically accidental, of both forces that has reshaped the social and cultural environment in which we live. In that sense, my approach to superdiversity (e.g. Blommaert & Rampton 2011) differs quite substantially from the original formulations proposed by Steven Vertovec (2006, 2007). There is in the field of sociolinguistics more "phenomenal shit that hits the fan" than just more people moving from more places to more places. And this "phenomenal shit" is also not just "centripetal" (the term used by Marcy Brink-Danan to describe Vertovec's focus on large metropolitan centers such as London): globalization

effects are also ("centrifugally") widespread in the so-called margins of the world (Wang et al. 2014).

In visionary writings, Manuel Castells spoke of "the rise of the network society" (1996) as a process in which the Durkheimian-Parsonian sociology of Modernity would be increasingly confronted by social units challenging almost all traditional features of "community" – timespace (sedentary) copresence, transgenerational sociocultural transmission and the sharedness of formative sociocultural and political norms and conventions. Such traditional units have not disappeared, but they are now complemented by new units and formations that defy the traditional views – think of the globally (hyper)active communities of mass online game players, often dozens of millions strong and operating through a technologically mediated specialized lingua franca. Or think of the communities of Facebook "friends" and Twitter "followers" who perform largely "phatic" but socially very sensitive new forms of communication such as "liking" and "retweeting" (Miller 2008; Varis 2014 provides an overview). The "online" world, however, is very much part of the "offline" one, because the globally online-gaming teenagers do still have dinner with their parents at home, talk about their games with them, and teach them, *en cours de route,* some of the online lingua franca vocabulary.

The intrinsic fluidity and instability of such online groups and their effects on offline life ("conviviality on demand", so to speak; Varis & Blommaert 2014) generates an immense field of contention over forms of and criteria for membership, in a variety of degrees, and few matters are as hotly debated as those that relate to the does and don'ts of "authenticity". Observe that this field of contention is replete with *repressive* structures – forms of macro- and micro-policing and had-hoc normative and prescriptive "how to" proclamations in what is supposed to be a "free" and unscripted space are among the most immediately striking phenomena in online contexts (Varis & Wang 2011).

The complexities of such issues can be judged from the case discussed in Paja Faudree's paper. A "traditional" popular cultural genre – Mazatec *Muertos* music – now circulates on YouTube and triggers elaborate discourses of authenticity and diversity oriented towards various scales of "community " (Faudree argues in favor of a regional scale level, besides local, national and global scales). This phenomenon – a reconfigured "community" now focusing around renewed forms of cultural production and discourses of membership – is prompted, precisely, by a confluence of intensified migration and widespread availability and

use of online technologies. Faudree describes complex and new semiotic practices in which "real" addressees are accompanied by "virtual" ones, producing "a shifting semiotics of scale where collectivities of other scope are explicitly and inexplicitly invoked". In the process, the temporal order and chronotopical structure of "tradition" is reconfigured and new (evidently multilingual) discursive norms are added to existing orders of indexicality. In short: we see how superdiversity re-orders a broad and varied field of objects, practices, participants and meanings that define "community" and "authenticity". And so, remarkably, we see how "the region's most traditional holiday [has] become the venue for such powerful, productive innovations".

The clue here is *complexity*: online performance and uptake of *Muertos* music create a layer of unprecedented "powerful, productive innovations", and the thing is that these do not stay online but also spill over into and interact with "offline" social life: online remarks yield offline echoes, and vice versa, and the normative centers for discussing the legitimacy of what happens shift up and down accordingly. The entire field has now become one huge and complex "strategically deployable shifter", one could say, operating now across far less predictable audiences distributed over different scales. Diversity has acquired a new dimension here, and we have yet to design a precise vocabulary for such complex phenomena and processes (cf. Blommaert 2014).

The creation of a regional scale enabled by newly developed mass media also emerges as an issue of complexity in Becky Schulties' account of the contentious and ambivalent status of "Arabic" in Pan-Arab satellite-broadcast talent programs. A global media template – the talent show (*Arab* Idol, of course) – is brought into a scale of circulation effectively generated, shaped and formatted by new culture industries – the Pan-Arab world covered by television satellites – and results in a new and heightened awareness of the diversity of ways of speaking Arabic across that world. The paradox is clear: media formats such as the ones described by Schulties are built on (and derive their *raison d'être* from) a language ideology stressing the unifying role of Arabic in shaping that particular scale-level of the media market. That same move, however, opens a wide field of indexical distinction to be played out in judgments of quality and character of contestants – the centrifugal scale-shaping language ideology *embeds* another, centripetal one in which "Arabic" can, and must, be cut up in numerous fragments, each of which point upwards or downward on axes of valuation, to "amusing" or "distinguished" qualities, while *all serve simultaneously as features of a common "Arab-ness"*. Convergence and divergence in speech become – indeed – strategically deployable

shifters in a competition, publicly mediated, for – indeed – "authenticity", and different degrees of fluency in enregistering the indexicals of scale-sensitive "quality" yield distinctive outcomes. This counts for *all* those who participate in the communicative system: contestants, subregional audiences and program makers.

The fundamental point here is to see that, *contra* the sociological (and sociolinguistic) imagination of a previous era and the policed and enforced monocentricity of the present nation-state, the semiotic diacritics of unity and diversity, membership and non-membership, are *not fixed and static* but mobile, strategically deployable, context-dependent and relative to specific orientations to scale – talking to the local jurors, talking to the global format, talking to the Pan-Arab audience or to specific subregional audiences. We saw the same phenomena in Faudree's case: the notion of "community" emerging from the complex discursive patterns online and offline was highly dependent on the specific moments and foci of articulation. There was not one unified community in this game, but several different ones conceived – in complex and unstable ways – as one, "authentic" community. I also see this dynamics in Marcy Brink-Dana's analysis of interfaith dialogue organizations, where norms of what is appropriate and what is not can fly in every direction, "centripetal" as well as "centrifugal". In this new superdiverse environment, boundaries appear and disappear dependent on the kinds of dynamics described earlier.

So what are "communities" then? Old ideas and vocabularies obviously do not cover the intense – yes, right – diversification of appearances of what used to be seen as one singular community, such as that of Faudree's Mazatec or the Frenchmen whom the Abbé Grégoire, discussed in Moore's text, had in mind when he designed the language policy of the French revolutionary Republic. It may be better, thus, to describe actual *practices* rather than the social formations that are supposed to perform them. While the latter appear in perpetual flux within a certain bandwidth of regulation and control, the former can be examined with a relative degree of conceptual stability. And there is perhaps one constant practice discernible in the "phenomenal shit" we are facing: *focusing*. Collectives of individuals, varying in size; composition, background and outlook appear to focus – briefly as in the case of the Facebook "likes", more durably as in the field of "standard" language education in contemporary French schools – on shared and socioculturally conditioned sets of semiotic forms mapped onto (and thus recognizable in terms of) social, cultural and political functions (Blommaert & Varis 2013). We earlier called these mappings orders of indexicality. In a polycentric social environment – a default condition – multiple orders of indexicality are available, often

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simultaneously, which is why semiotic acts of focusing are acts of affiliation and belonging, of inclusion and exclusion that are perpetually measured and valued against *other* orders, such as those of the nation-state or other centering institutions (Silverstein 1998; Blommaert 2005, 2010; Agha 2007).

The outcome is what we used to call "meaning", but let it be noted that this concept is now fully *sociolinguistic*, and not just linguistic, in nature. Meaning is an effect produced within a complex sociolinguistic system: the moment we have realized and adequately formulated this, I believe we will have fulfilled at least a major part of the initial promise of a sociolinguistics that was grounded in anthropology.

The future of superdiversity

The papers in this collection demonstrate the potency of a science that has broken itself loose of the historical ideological framework that produced it. The fact that its practitioners quarrel perpetually over the meaning and significance of some of its terms and concepts – take diversity and superdiversity as examples – is simple and conclusive evidence of the speed with which it moves and the greatly improved precision with which it is capable of addressing the objects and phenomena covered by the contested notions. And the fact that such quarrels – conceptual explorations, in actual fact – are couched in a critical re-reading of the genealogy of our theoretical and methodological instruments, testifies in turn to the massive analytical power of the present work: it not just extends scholarship, it recasts its very foundations while it is extending it. One can only be happy about that.

The most fruitful and productive trend in all this is that work such as that which is displayed in this collection does not attempt to reduce the complexity of its object – it attempts to comprehensively describe and interpret that complexity. While such work denies one the comfort of simplicity in argument, it comes with a very large bonus of persuasiveness and accuracy in explanation. The capacity now to enter into the "sub-molecular" structure of sociolinguistic phenomena, and, through that lens, analyze contemporary as well as historical cases, is manifestly innovative and productive. The perpetual re-thinking of sociolinguistic superdiversity, this is shown on every page in this collection, promises further complications – but also, even if it results in a ban on the term superdiversity, a far superior understanding about that central object of sociolinguistics: the diversity of human semiotic activity and its effects in the real world.

About these real-world effects: it is clear that the field of diversity in public and academic debate is differently structured in different societies, and this means that insights currently gained from work on sociolinguistic superdiversity must always be checked against, and adjusted to local conditions of occurrence; as emphasized earlier, it is a fundamentally ethnographic enterprise that accepts the inescapable uncertainty imposed on any theoretical framework by every new case of application (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 10-12). The papers in this collection clearly illustrate this, which is why they are really valuable contributions.

I have emphasized in my remarks the explorative, tentative and unfinished character of superdiversity as a zone of academic development. This is something else than calling superdiversity a "shifter": things can only shift from a given, fixed position – a "theory" that has a finished character and can, consequently, be "imposed" and "prescribed" in Linguistics 101 courses and beyond. I detect this imagery (and vocabulary) in Marcy Brink-Danan's paper and consider it entirely wrong, both factually and in terms of assumptions about what science is and how scientists operate. There simply is no Vatican, no Pope or Bible of superdiversity, and those who try to argue otherwise will be hard pressed to submit the necessary evidence. I found no such evidence in brink-Danan's paper, which is driven by a regrettable reification of what is in actual fact a dynamic process. A collection of papers such as the one on which I write these comments is evidence *precisely* of the unfinished character of the intellectual enterprise and of the need for perpetual dialogue around work-in-progress, perpetually driven by this old ethnographic principle: that any "portable analytic" (Brink-Danan's synonym for theory) has its feet in actual local and situated analysis and derives its validity not from grand but hardly ratified claims to leadership but from continuous critical validation in entirely different areas of deployment.

What has been achieved in this collection of papers, therefore, is substantial: there are important contributions here to the development of a mode of questioning sociolinguistic material synthesizing several previous attempts and adding new substance to them, and this is done not by scholars who thunder from the mountain, but who instead accept the explorative and open-ended, dialogical nature of intellectual work. It is not a fight about ownership of terms and arguments, even less a quest for "European" or "American" genealogies of thoughts; it is the contrary: it is about sharing views in a joint process of construction. And as long as that process remains open-ended, it will remain productive.

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