

Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 178

Society through the lens of language: A new look at social groups and integration

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February 2017



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Society through the lens of language:

A new look at social groups and integration

Jan Blommaert

Introduction

There are forms of scientific activity that are rarely practiced by sociolinguists, and one of them is the self-conscious construction of theory.¹ Sociolinguists, by and large, appear to share a self-perception of staunchly empirical analysts devoted to the rigorous empirical exploration of sociolinguistic details and the patterns in which they can be understood. In such exercises, new theoretical constructs, concepts and categories can be, and frequently are being, developed; but generally such constructs, concepts and categories are presented as valid within sociolinguistics only – their extrapolation towards more widely relevant social theory usually being left to others.²

These others, however, rarely do that. With just a small number of exceptions, mainstream sociologists have refused to pay detailed attention to the thing they themselves see as defining what it is to be social: human interaction. In 1969, Herbert Blumer (one of those exceptions) could summarize the field as follows:

‘a society consists of individuals interacting with one another. The activities of the members occur predominantly in response to one another or in relation to one another. Even though this is recognized almost universally in definitions of human society,

¹ This paper is part of a project which I call ‘Durkheim and the Internet’, devoted precisely to converting contemporary sociolinguistic insights into social-theoretical statements. See Blommaert (2017) for a survey and first synthesis. The case of integration was presented at the conference ‘Connecting the dots’, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman, November 2016. I am grateful to Najma Al Zidjaly and several other participants for stimulating feedback and discussion on the ideas presented here.

² One can refer to the essays in Coupland (2016) for examples. The volume is dedicated to ‘theoretical debates’, and one striking feature is that these debates are almost exclusively located *within* sociolinguistics as a discipline. To be sure, such exercises are mandatory; in fact, theoretical updating should be a continuous feature of *any* scientific project. But the obvious connection between improved sociolinguistic theory and existing social theory is largely left unexplored. Observe that one specific way in which sociolinguists have attempted to incorporate social theory into their work is by drawing upon the handful of social theorists who did speak out on language in several of its modes of appearance. Think of Bourdieu, Foucault, Habermas, Laclau and, of course, Goffman, as cases in point.

social interaction is usually taken for granted and treated as having little, if any, significance in its own right.’ (Blumer 1969:7)

The effect is that a large amount of what C. Wright Mills (1959) famously called the ‘sociological imagination’³ is built on abstract and often idealized visions of social interaction patterns with no feet on the ground, so to speak. Conversely, such abstract and idealized visions, now converted into theoretical concepts and categories, are transplanted, as Glyn Williams (1992) observed, into mainstream sociolinguistics, only there to clash with empirical findings that often at least substantially qualify such models, while in some circumstances outright contradicting them. This social theory-amending, or even theory-creating potential of sociolinguistics remains undervalued.

The lead assumption in this essay is that sociolinguists are, whether one likes it or not, a specialized type of sociologists, who observe society through the lens of language and interaction. The latter is a *sui generis* sociological object with an unmatched immediacy and accuracy as to empirically gauging the dynamics of social life: any social event and environment is characterized by patterns of interaction that are specific to it, and changes in such environments are observable in interactional behavior long before they show up in statistics. In that sense, I see contemporary advanced sociolinguistics as an empirical fact-checker for other social sciences and humanities, and as a rich source of innovative, empirically grounded hypotheses (in other words, *theories*) of general relevance.

I shall offer two illustrations of the potential of contemporary sociolinguistics as a source for new theoretical directions in social science at large. Both are tentative and explorative of course; yet they have their feet firmly in substantial amounts of sociolinguistic evidence and are, thus, to use Glaser & Strauss’ (1967) well-weathered term, ‘grounded theories’. First, I shall show how ongoing sociolinguistic research can shed new light on an old and persistent conceptual problem in sociology: that of delineating and defining social groups. The second proposal is related to that: in mainstream sociology (especially in the Durkheim-Parsons tradition), social integration is seen as crucial for understanding the development of societies and of social groups within them. Both the conceptualization of social groups and that of social integration can be significantly enhanced, I suggest, by drawing on recent insights from

³ For Mills, the term ‘sociological imagination’ stood for a fundamental level of sociological theorizing, the level at which ‘the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated’ (1959: 5).

the sociolinguistic study of the online-offline interface. Let me first offer some observations on the latter.

Theorizing the online-offline social world

Most widely circulating social theory has its origins in the 20th century and documents attempts at making sense of a concrete (or ideal) society. That means: a society characterized by specific kinds of population, of sociocultural, economic and political relationships and identities derived from them, of institutions and other forms of sociocultural, economic and political infrastructures. And a society which is, because of all these characteristics, prone to specific lines of development, likely to generate particular forms of power, conflict and inequality but also forms of culture, happiness and self-confidence. My next phrase may now sound platitudinous: the societies that were the object of such theoretical efforts were pre-internet societies, ‘offline’ societies as we would presently call them. The first generation of sociolinguists, too, addressed a society in which patterns of social interaction were offline, and in which patterns of sociality generated by such modes of interaction had a tangible, ‘non-virtual’ character based on physical spacetime co-presence. John Gumperz did not analyze Facebook interactions by absence of Facebook.

Looking back after more than two decades at the work of Manuel Castells (1996) and Arjun Appadurai (1996), one cannot remain unaffected by the astuteness of their foresight. Both were seen, at the time, as theorists of globalization. Globalization, indeed, took a sharp upturn as a topic of research after the end of the Cold War; not, it must be underscored, because globalization was a *new* phenomenon (the world was effectively globalized in the late 19th century, and important aspects of globalization were in place much earlier; see Wallerstein 1983; Hobsbawm 1987), but because globalization had acquired an ICT infrastructure of unprecedented power, impact and pervasiveness, allowing and enabling spacetime compression, scale-jumps from the local to the global, and a decentralized knowledge economy in which internet applications entered (as mainstream commodities) everyday and institutional life at breathtaking pace.

The effects of ICT on society and social life in all its aspects prompted Castells and Appadurai to see their era as one of historical discontinuity, even of revolutionary change, for the very fabric of society and the nature of social dynamics had been profoundly altered. In

Appadurai's view, we had entered another condition of modernity, called 'vernacular globalization':⁴

'The megarethoric of developmental modernization (...) in many countries is still with us. But it is often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music and other expressive forms, which allow modernization to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies'. (ibid.)

Due to the rapid spread of new knowledge and communication technologies, Appadurai (1996: 194) noted 'new forms of disjuncture between spatial and virtual neighborhoods', seriously complicating the actual meaning of a term such as 'local practice'; he also saw the eruption of 'diasporic public spheres' revealing new horizons for political and social action, previously confined by the nation-state (1996: 22). Castells (1996), in turn, described the massive effect of new information technologies on economic and political processes, on the organization of labor, on identity work and on social organization. Castells predicted the development of a new type of social formation which he called 'network' and which was not constrained by the traditional boundaries of social groups. Both saw a complex new sociocultural, political and economic order in the making and invited others to join them in describing and theorizing these changes. Some of those heeding the call were sociolinguists.

Online sociolinguistics has, since, yielded remarkable insights into both the new forms of social interaction online and the identity effects they trigger, which I shall briefly highlight. (for surveys see Leppänen & Peuronen 2012; Androutsopoulos 2016; Varis & van Nuenen 2017; Leppänen, Westinen & Kytölä 2017).

1. In a general sense, the emergence of online communication as a feature of everyday life has dramatically increased the importance of **literacy**, and more specifically of multimodal literacy. Online communication is overwhelmingly written (or 'designed': Kress 2003; Jewitt 2013). Writing, as we know, is a field of normativity which is structured quite differently from spoken discourse – writing 'errors' are often treated with considerably less tolerance than errors in speech – but, at the same time, online writing practices display an incredible dynamism and innovativeness dislodging the traditional boundaries of 'writing' (and, evidently, those of language in its traditional

⁴ It can therefore also be read as a gloss for what we elsewhere describe as 'superdiversity'. See Blommaert (2010), Arnaut (2016); Blommaert & Rampton (2016); Arnaut et al (2017).

sense). Consider the now widespread use of emoticons and expressions such as ‘OMG’ and ‘LOL’, the influence of AAVE-based HipHop register in new genres of mobile and online communication (Kytölä & Westinen 2015), the complex blends of visual, textual, static and dynamic features of contemporary websites, and, especially, the phenomenon of ‘memes’ (Du 2016; Blommaert 2015a). People *do* very different things in and with semiotic material online, compared to what they do in offline contexts.

2. Much of what is done, especially on social media, appears to be what is known as **phatic communion**: the transmission and exchange of messages in which not propositional content (‘information’) appears to be a central concern, but the maintenance of ‘convivial’ social relations and the performance of specific acts of identity – that of, e.g., a ‘friend’ by means of Facebook ‘likes’, a ‘follower’ through Twitter retweets, or just an ‘acquaintance’ via quick and short mobile messages (Miller 2008; Jones 2014; Varis & Blommaert 2013; Velghe 2013).
3. The boundaries between online and offline social processes are **porous**. Registers of online activities such as Mass Online Games can spill over into the everyday vocabulary of gamers and become new indexicals for expressing social ties (Sierra 2016), and online activities become a learning environment where resources are built and circulated that now also profoundly influence offline practices (Leppänen 2007; Maly & Varis 2015; Blommaert 2016). Conversely, offline identity features can influence the choice and use of specific online platforms and modes of conduct (boyd 2011). And, of course, new phenomena such as online dating are meant to go offline as soon as the first online steps have been completed (Toma 2016). The Internet has also become an enormous repository of explicitly didactic and normative material – the ‘how to?’ genre – in which people can get clear instructions for how to perform specific forms of identity (Blommaert & Varis 2015).
4. Even so, online forms of self-presentation have **characteristics and affordances of their own**, not reducible to existing offline resources. Given the absence, in general, of face-to-face contact, people can hide behind an alias and construct entirely fictional personae for themselves – something that characterizes the darker side of the online social world (boyd 2014: 100). But in more benign ways, there is a tendency to present oneself in the ‘my best day’ mode – the way one wishes to be perceived by others (Baron 2008: 71; boyd 2014). There is also a plethora of new and reconfigured discursive genres, ranging from ‘Wiki’-like formats of collaborative writing to

particular modes of confessional narrative, raising issues of privacy and the limits of self-exposure (cf. Page 2012; van Nuenen 2016). The online world is a space where *distinct* forms of identity work can be performed, only distantly connected to what goes on elsewhere.

In spite of this final remark, all of the above implies that quite a bit of contemporary identity work is carried over and oscillates between online and offline contexts, creating highly intricate connections between, for instance, what is expected or permitted on Facebook versus on the school playground (think of cyber bullying) or the workplace (think of employers monitoring employees' social media accounts). Thus, what the online-offline nexus now offers is a vastly expanded range of 'chronotopes' and cross-chronotope connections, in which to organize and normatively evaluate social behavior and identity effects (cf. Blommaert & De Fina 2017). The chronotopic nature of identities thus now shapes an enormous panorama of possible and expected identities, vastly more than those captured by the bureaucratic, 'thick' diacritics traditionally foregrounded in the sociological tradition (nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, age and so forth). The variation of chronotopes we move through in online-offline social life demands, and endows us with, a plethora of 'light identities', not excluding the old and established thick categories but complementing them. Thick diacritics such as race, gender, class or ethnicity are not absent, but they are performed in different and sometimes surprising ways and thus in need of a more delicate balancing with a wide range of other, 'light' forms of identity. To name just two, social class is not out, and neither is ethnicity – but both are now imaginable as far more 'styled' than 'given' identities, drawn from within a repertoire of identities that contains lots of different orientations. (e.g. Rampton 2006; Harris 2006; boyd 2011; Goebel 2015; Wang 2015; Faudree 2016; Fox & Sharma 2016).

A theory of light social groups

These remarks obviously have a bearing on any discussion of social groups as well, as there is no realistic way in which one can talk about any individual's identity without making reference, explicitly or implicitly, to the larger social units with reference to which such identities are performed.

Any discussion of the conceptualization of social units – groups, communities, society itself – has a long pedigree. Sociological classics address 'society' as their object and attempt to find and express the rules that guide it. Sociology, it is said, is the science of society. How such a

society should be defined, however, has been a consistent bone of contention since the very early days of sociology as a science. Generally speaking, authors reserve the term ‘society’ for the perceived *permanent* features of a social system, often *ad hoc* circumscribed (e.g. in much of Durkheim’s and Parsons’ work) by the nation-state. Thus, there is a preference for features believed to be less subject to rapid or radical change – as distinct from features seen as superficial, transient or less reliable as indicators of social structure. Such a usage of the term ‘society’, however, is often poorly supported. Here is what Georg Simmel had to say about it:

‘It is only a superficial attachment to linguistic usage (a usage quite adequate for daily practice) which makes us reserve the term ‘society’ for *permanent* interactions only. More specifically, the interactions we have in mind when we talk about ‘society’ are crystallized as definable, consistent structures such as the state and the family, the guild and the church, social classes and organizations based on common interests’.
(1950: 9)

We encounter the same preference for such thick and permanent forms of organization in the work of Parsons (e.g. 1964; 2007), who focused on the governing pattern of ‘values’ and their integrative effects to characterize society while smaller and lighter social groups were said to be tied together by ‘norms’ – with the interactions between both often resulting, sometimes, in contradictions and disorder. This hierarchical ranking in which society is presented as organized, primarily, by strong ties within thick communities such as those listed by Simmel (the state, church, etc.) and, secondarily, by lighter ties within a plethora of social groups, of course did not prevent attention to the latter. But studies of smaller social sub-groups often emphasized their relatively superficial and ephemeral character. See, for instance, how Bourdieu & Passeron describe the Parisian student community of the 1960s (1964: 54-55, French original, my translation):

‘...the student milieu is possibly less integrated today than ever before (...) Everything leads us, thus, to doubt whether students, effectively, constitute a homogeneous, independent and integrated social group’.

Lack of homogeneity, independence or autonomy, and a low level of integration, thus, determine the nature of students as a social group. Bourdieu & Passeron clearly see students as ‘less’ of a social group than, for instance, social class; and one should not be carried away by the lure of superficial groupness:

‘Students can have common practices, but that should not lead us to conclude that they have identical experiences of such practices, or above all a collective one.’ (1964: 24-25)

Precisely the same argument was used by Goffman in *Encounters* (1961), when he described poker players as a tightly focused community of people otherwise unacquainted, in which clear and transparent rules of conduct were shared (and assumed to be shared as soon as someone joins a game). Goffman saw such brief moments of tight but temporary and ephemeral groupness as aggregations of people sharing *just the rules of the encounters* (a microhegemony, we can say), but little beyond it. Such light groups could be studied as a way to arrive at insights into fundamental social procedures such as socialization and identity development (see e.g. Becker et al. 1961 for a classic). But they could not even be seen as social groups, and when it comes to understanding ‘society’, attention should go to the thick communities. Those were so heavily reified that amendments to the established set of thick communities, potentially dislodging the consensus about its consistency and stability, invariably led to considerable controversy.⁵

Simmel, we saw, expressed an awareness of the conventional – untheorized – nature of this consensus about the scope of ‘society’. And after mentioning ‘the state and the family, the guild and the church, social classes and organizations based on common interests’ as the stereotypical arenas for ‘permanent interactions’, he goes on:

‘But in addition to these, there exist an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationships and kinds of interaction. Taken singly, they may appear negligible. But since in actuality they are inserted into the comprehensive and, as it were, official social formations, they alone produce society as we know it. (...) On the basis of the major social formations – the traditional subject matter of social science – it would be similarly impossible to piece together the real life of society as we encounter it in our experience.’ (Simmel 1950: 9)⁶

⁵ One can think of the many debates throughout the 20th century on the concept and validity of social class as a key sociological notion. Attempts towards ‘inventing’ new or additional social classes were consistently met with hostility – see, for examples, C. Wright Mills’ (1951) description of an emerging ‘White Collar’ class, and Guy Standing’s (2011) proposal for seeing the ‘precariat’ as a class-on-the-way-in.

⁶ With this quote Erving Goffman opened his PhD dissertation, and much of Goffman’s work can thus be seen as engaging with the baseline ‘sociation’ processes Simmel outlined, developing within ‘less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of interaction’. I am grateful to Rob Moore for pointing this out to me.

In other words – and here is a methodological exhortation of considerable importance – if we intend to understand ‘society as we know it’, we need to examine these ‘less conspicuous forms of relationships and kinds of interaction’ not instead of but alongside ‘the major social formations’. We can only get access to the necessarily abstract ‘society’ by investigating the on-the-ground micropractices performed by its members, taking into account that these micropractices may diverge considerably from what we believe characterizes ‘society’ and may eventually show complex ties connecting practices and features of social structure (cf. Collins 1981).

The problem is familiar for sociolinguists: ‘Language’ with a capital L can only be examined by investigating its actual situated forms of usage; and while we prefer to define Language as a stable, autonomous and homogeneous object, the actual forms of usage are characterized by bewildering variability, diversity and changeability. Understanding what language is and does, in the realities of social life, forces us to take the variable, diverse and dynamic actual forms of language usage (‘speech’) as our object, even if they cannot immediately be squeezed into a normative framework of Language (cf Hymes 1996). Even more: a privileged site for research, offering significant analytical breakthroughs, are small and highly heterogeneous peer groups where the boundaries of languages, and of the ‘major social formations’, are blurred (e.g. Gumperz 1982; Rampton 2006; Harris 2006; Jørgensen 2008).

We can extend these insight now and bring them into the broader field of social action. The theoretical core of what follows can be summarized in this way:

- Online social practices generate a broad range of entirely new forms of light communities;
- In the online-offline social contexts we inhabit, understanding social action requires attention to such light groups alongside thick groups;
- Because in the everyday lived experience of large numbers of people, membership of light communities often prevails over that of thick communities;
- Light communities, thus, display many of the features traditionally ascribed to thick communities. Even more: if we wish to comprehend contemporary forms of social cohesion, we need to be aware of the prominent role of light communities and light practices of conviviality as factors of cohesion.

Let me briefly elaborate the very first point. For those who wonder whether the internet has created anything new in the way of social formations: yes, it has. Social media, in particular,

have generated groups never previously attested: tremendously large communities of users, who – contrary to television audiences – *actively* contribute to the contents and interaction patterns of new media. Facebook’s 1,79 billion users constitute a media-using community that has no precedent in history; this also applies to the approximately 10 million people who play the mass online game World of Warcraft; and to the 50 million people who use the Tinder dating app to find a suitable partner.

All of these communities are formed by individuals voluntarily and actively joining them to perform entirely novel forms of social practice. Membership of such groups is experienced by many of its members as indispensable in everyday life, even if the practices performed in such groups would not always be seen as vital or indicative of one’s core identity – these are light groups and practices. But in addition to these voluntary communities, the internet generates *involuntary* communities as well through its algorithmic functions, bringing people together in networks of perceived shared interests and profiles, of which members are often unaware. The internet, thus, generates a range of new *performed* identities as well as a range of new *ascribed* identities; whereas the former usually function as spaces for interpersonal interaction and knowledge exchange among users, the latter’s function is opaque for the ascribed members, who are categorized in terms of third-party priorities ranging from marketing to intelligence and security.

Having established this elementary point, I must now turn to the online-offline nexus and review some relevant research on how the interplay of online and offline identity resources enables such specific forms of communities to be formed.

In a recent study, Ico Maly and Piia Varis (2015) show how the now well-known urban ‘hipster’ community must be seen as a typical instance of Appadurai’s vernacular globalization. While hipsters have become a globalized phenomenon, their actual occurrence, characteristics and social positions are locally determined, jointly yielding a polynomic and microhegemonic identity field (cf. Blommaert 2017). The global features of the groups are largely internet-based imageries of lifestyle, consumption ethos, outfit and commodity orientation (think of the coffee cult, beards, skinny jeans, iPhones and vintage glasses as emblematic features). And the internet offers, as Maly & Varis demonstrate, a mountain of ‘how to’ resources for aspiring (or insecure) hipsters worldwide. The internet, thus, functions as a *learning environment* for the various norms that shape and police hipster cultures.

Included in such norms are fine discursive identity distinctions that refer to the hipster label itself:

‘We can thus distinguish social groups that dress like hipsters, share an identity discourse based on authenticity, and frequent hipster places. They distance themselves from another group of people they call hipsters: a ‘real’ hipster is someone who rejects being part of a social group, and thus also rejects the hipster label which is reserved for people who desperately want to be ‘hip’ and are thus not ‘real’ or authentic. Nor are they true innovators or trendsetters, which the individualistic, authentic hipsters are.’ (Maly & Varis 2015: 10)

Thus, there is a strong tendency to self-identify as a non-mainstream, ‘authentic’, countercultural individualist, which, however, goes hand in hand with an exuberant and highly self-conscious neoliberal (and, thus, mainstream) consumerism, supported by a globalized ‘tight fit’ fashion industry. As an effect, this quest for individualism results in a remarkable, global, degree of uniformity. Hipsters are eminently recognizable as hipsters, even if local accents do count and carry local identity values, and even if the usual fractality of orders of indexicality allows for emerging subdivisions within hipsterdom, such as the ‘mipster’ (Muslim Hipster).

Maly and Varis propose the term ‘translocal micro-population’ to describe hipsters, and it is easy to think of other globalized lifestyle communities for whom this label might be suitable – think of HipHop, Rasta, Metal or Gothic communities, but also of ‘fashionistas’ and ‘foodies’, of Premier League soccer fans and so forth. These micro-populations could be more finely described as groups of people who are translocally connected in what we could call *communities of knowledge*, while locally they perform as *communities of practice*. The latter term is better known, and Lave & Wenger (1991) used it to describe groups whose frequent interaction provides a learning environment for rules and norms – not unlike Goffman’s (1961) acquaintances in their encounters or Becker et al.’s (1961) medical school students – and knowledge is evidently, in Lave & Wenger’s view, an ingredient of practice.

Theirs was, however, an ‘offline’ description in which learning practices presupposed spacetime copresence. What we see in the context of hipsters and other contemporary globalized lifestyle groups is that the internet has become an infrastructure for *separate* and *specific* forms of knowledge gathering and circulation not premised on experiences of face-to-

face interaction, and so enabling a far wider scope and depth of scaled and polycentric community formation. We are facing a new type of social formation here: a light community that differs from the ‘major social formations’ listed by Simmel, transcending the diacritics often thought to be essential in understanding social action, and (returning to Bourdieu and Passeron’s criteria of social groupness) displaying a high degree of homogeneity, autonomy and integration over and beyond their diversity.

The capacity of the internet for generating such translocal communities of knowledge is immense, and we are only beginning to explore these phenomena as relevant features of the sociological imagination. Such communities of knowledge are usually just that: online communities or fora where information on an infinite variety of topics is exchanged and debated (e.g. Kytölä 2013; Hanell & Salö 2015; Mendoza-Denton 2015). But the internet has also enabled the emergence of a new form of translocal political community mobilization, and it is impossible to understand contemporary political and social dynamics without looking into such web-based communities of knowledge (cf. McCaughey & Ayers 2003; Graeber 2009).⁷ In recent years, communities that started online have won offline electoral victories as *bona fide* political parties – think of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

Such processes of online community formation also occur where one would least expect it, and some of the most impressive findings come from China, a country known for its restrictive internet censorship policy. Caixia Du’s (2016) study of the online activities of the Chinese precariat can illustrate this. Due to China’s economic surge, millions of young and highly educated people have become employed in precarious administrative jobs. These people, Du argues, share acute feelings of disenfranchisement: low income and insecure jobs have placed them in the margins of a society increasingly focused on material success and conspicuous consumption. Since they are digitally literate and since there are hardly any spaces for unimpeded sociopolitical dissidence in China, they articulate and share these experiences online. Du describes how this large community – a ‘class in the making’ as she calls it – develops its own secret language through the clever manipulation of memes,

⁷ In fact, some of the most high-profile political events of the past decade were internet phenomena: Wikileaks and its release of hacked classified documents, the Panama Papers revealing shocking amounts of money hidden in offshore tax havens, and the alleged Russian hacking of the Democratic Party computers and its possible effect on the election of Donald Trump as US president in November 2016 (e.g. Brevini et al 2013). Trump’s own media strategy is sure to become a topic of research in future years as well. Trump systematically rejected what he called ‘mainstream mass media’, claiming they were biased, and waged an intensive (and algorithmically engineered) social media campaign – leading to frequent allegations of ‘fake news’. See Maly (2016) for a first appraisal.

sufficiently sophisticated to mislead the censor's search engines. The community also constructs and shares an emblematic 'culture' called *e'gao* and revolving around parody and persiflage of prestigious cultural objects; and its members have created a distinct identity label for themselves: *diaosi*, a derogatory term signifying 'losers' (see also Li et al. 2014; Yang et al. 2015). These 'soft', cultural practices, Du insists, show the gradual coming into being of a previously non-existent social formation in China: a large precariat, critical of the government and billionaire elites and a potential source of large-scale social unrest in China. And all of this happens online.

Light communities, we can see, appear to have thick characteristics and modes of practice. There are reasons to believe, consequently that the light practices that characterize so much of the online interactions – think of liking, endorsing, sharing, retweeting on social media – are not as light as one might think. Their main functions, one suggests, are the establishment and maintenance of relationships of conviviality (Varis & Blommaert 2013). But we should not forget that conviviality is an elementary and crucial form of social conduct within established communities – very much like greeting neighbors or exchanging Christmas wishes with friends and relatives. They could thus, as well, be seen as light practices with a thick effect: social cohesion and integration within online groups and, increasingly, also spilling over into the offline world.

A polycentric theory of social integration

'Integration' continues to be used as a keyword to describe the processes by means of which outsiders – immigrants, to be more precise – need to 'become part' of their 'host culture'. I have put quotation marks around three crucial terms here, and the reasons why will become clear shortly. Integration in this specific sense, of course, has been a central sociological concept in the Durkheim-Parsons tradition: a society is a conglomerate of social groups held together by integration, i.e. the sharedness of (a single set of) central values which define the character, the identity (singular) of that particular society (singular). And it is this specific sense of the term that motivates complaints – a long tradition – in which immigrants are blamed for not being 'completely integrated', or more specifically, 'remaining stuck in their own culture' and 'refusing' to integrate in their host society (see Blommaert & Verschueren 1998).

Half a century ago, in a trenchant critique of Parsons' concept on integration, C. Wright Mills (1959: 47) observed that historical changes in societies must inevitably involve shifts in the

modes of integration. Several scholars documented such fundamental shifts (think of Bauman, Castells, Beck and Lash) but mainstream discourses, academic and lay, still continue to follow the monolithic and static Parsonian imagination. In what follows I want to propose that new modes of diaspora, now conditioned by access to new forms of mediated communication, do indeed result in new modes of integration. To formulate this as a theoretical proposition: *people must be integrated in a wide variety of communities, both thick and light ones, and to differing degrees.* A ‘well integrated’ individual is an individual who has achieved such diverse forms of integration and is able to move from one community to another one while shifting the modes of integration expected in each of them. Evidence for this proposition can be found in new modes of interaction and new repertoires of such modes.

In a splendid dissertation, Jelke Brandehof (2014; for a similar study, see Nemcova 2016; also Tall 2004) investigated the ways in which a group of Cameroonian doctoral students at Ghent University (Belgium) used communicative resources in their interactions with others. She investigated the technologies – mobile phone and online applications – as well as the language and literacy resources used in specific patterns of communication with specific people. In other words, Brandehof looked at the repertoire of communicative resources of her research participants, and at the ways in which elements from their repertoires were deployed in actual modes of interaction. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of the results for one male participant (Brandehof 2014: 38).

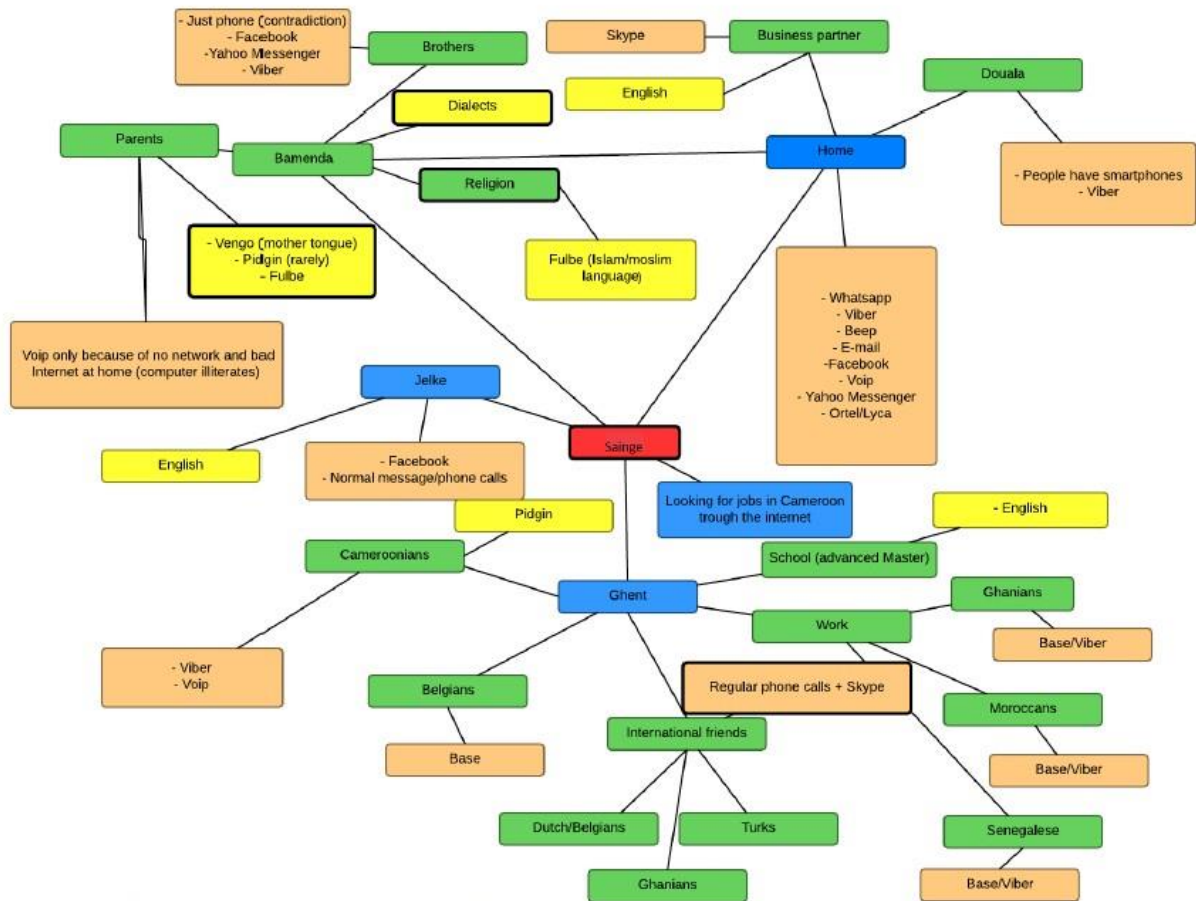


Figure 1: the communicative network of a Cameroonian PhD student in Ghent (Belgium).

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This figure, I would argue represents the empirical side of integration – *real forms of integration* in contemporary diaspora situations. Let me elaborate this.

The figure, no doubt, looks extraordinarily complex; yet there is a tremendous amount of order and nonrandomness to it. We see that the Cameroonian man deploys a wide range of technologies and platforms for communication: his mobile phone provider (with heavily discounted rates for overseas calls) for calls and text messages, skype, Facebook, Beep, Yahoo Messenger, different VOIP systems, Whatsapp and so forth. He also uses several different linguistic resources, some exclusively spoken, others spoken and written (in varying forms): Standard English, Cameroonian Pidgin, local languages (called ‘dialects’ in the figure), and Fulbe. And he maintains contacts in three different sites: his own physical, economic and social environment in Ghent, his ‘home environment’ in Cameroon, and the virtual environment of the ‘labor market’ in Cameroon. In terms of activities, he maintains contacts revolving around his studies, maintaining social and professional networks in Ghent, job hunting on the internet, and an intricate range of family and business activities back in

Cameroon. Each of these activities – here is order and nonrandomness – involves a conscious choice of technological medium and of linguistic resources in view of the addressee and, often, the topic of the interaction. Interaction with his brother in Cameroon is done through smartphone applications and in a local language, while interactions with other people in the same location, but on religious topics, are done in Fulbe, a language regionally marked as a medium among Muslims.

Let me now summarize this in a more theoretical discourse. We observe in this example how a structured set of social practices, drawing separately from a repertoire of available resources, is used to establish, maintain or alter specific social relationships within social groups (with colleagues, family, friends, locally and translocally). The social practices are *collective* interactional practices, and the relationship that are subject to such practices are collectively ratified forms of (Simmel's) 'sociation' – the ongoing creation of social events within a system of shared normativity. We also observe the amount of effort invested by Brandehof's participant in establishing and maintaining this complex range of social relationships, placing significant demands on the resources in his repertoire. The sociation we witness, thus, appears to be worth quite a price, it is a valuable good. In sum, we see collective social action, normatively organized (and in that sense 'cultural') and performed with high levels of commitment to the targeted relationships, and dispersed over several spacetime arrangements (chronotopes). I can now reformulate this in a Durkheimian-Parsonian frame.

Our subject is 'integrated', through the organized use of these communication instruments, in several communities. He is integrated in his professional and social environment in Ghent, in the local casual labor market where students can earn a bit on the side, in the Cameroonian labor market where his future lies, and in his home community with family and friends, including its religious dimensions. Note that I use a *positive* term here: he is integrated in all of these 'zones' that make up his life, because his life develops in real synchronized time in these different zones, and all of these zones play a vital part in this subject's life. He remains integrated as a family member, a friend, a Muslim and a business partner in Cameroon, while he also becomes integrated in his more directly tangible environment in Ghent – socially, professionally and economically. Note, of course, that some of these zones coincide with the thick groups of classical sociology – the nation-state, family, religion – while others can better be described as light communities – the student community, the workplace, web-based peer networks and so forth.

This level of simultaneous integration across communities, both thick and light ones, is *necessary*. Brandehof's participant intends to complete his doctoral degree work in Ghent and return as a highly qualified knowledge worker to Cameroon. Rupturing the Cameroonian networks, or even putting them temporarily on hold, might jeopardize his chances of reinsertion in a lucrative labor market (and business ventures) upon his return. While he is in Ghent, part of his life is spent there while another part continues to be spent in Cameroon, *for very good reasons*. The simultaneity of integration in a variety of communities, however, should not lead us to suggest that the *degrees* of integration would be similar. We can assume that our subject is more profoundly integrated in, for instance, his family and religious communities in Cameroon, than in the Ghent-based casual labor market where he needs to rely on the advice and support of others to find his way around.

I emphasized that our subject *has to* remain integrated across these different chronotopic zones – *sufficiently* integrated, not ‘completely’ integrated. And the technologies for cheap and intensive long-distance communication *enable* him to do so. This might be the fundamental shift in ‘modes of integration’ we see since the turn of the 21st century: diaspora no longer entails a temporal or permanent rupture with the places and communities of origin; neither, logically, does it entail ‘complete integration’ in the so-called host community, because there are instruments that enable one to lead a far more gratifying life, parts of which are spent in the host society while other parts are spent elsewhere. This is the actual face of Castells’ network society: we see that diasporic subjects keep one foot in the thick communities of family, neighborhood and local friends in their place of origin, while they keep another foot – on more instrumental terms – in the host society and yet another one in light communities such as internet-based groups and the casual labor market. Together, these different levels and centers of integration make up a late-modern diasporic life.

There is nothing exceptional or surprising to this: the jet-setting European professional business class does precisely the same when they go on business trips: smartphones and the internet enable them to make calls home and to chat with their daughters before bedtime, and to inform their social network of their whereabouts by means of social media updates. In that sense, the distance between Zygmunt Bauman's (1996) famous ‘tourist and vagabond’ is narrowing: various types of migrants are presently using technologies previously reserved for elite travelers. And just as the affordances of these technologies are seen as an improvement to a nomadic lifestyle by elite travelers, it is seen as a positive thing by these other migrants,

facilitating a more rewarding and harmonious lifestyle that does not involve painful ruptures of existing social bonds, social roles, activity patterns and identities.

What looks like a *problem* from within a vulgar-Parsonian political vision of ‘complete integration’, therefore, is in actual fact a *solution* for the people performing the ‘problematic’ behavior. The problem is *theoretical*, and rests upon the kind of monolithic and static sociological imagination criticized by C. Wright Mills and others, and the distance between this theory and the empirical facts of contemporary diasporic life. Demands for ‘complete integration’ in just one community (and complaints about the failure to do so) can best be seen as nostalgic and, when uttered in political debates, as false consciousness. Or more bluntly, as sociological surrealism.

Conclusion: A specialized sociology

Let me now make a bold claim: the two theories I suggested in this essay are not easy to dismiss or dislodge. Yes, there will be those who might object that they are grounded in a form of research the status of which as ‘science’ is questionable – most of the research on which I based my remarks is ethnographically organized qualitative, small-scale and case-based work. That’s definitely not what Karl Popper meant when he used the term ‘scientific’ (e.g. Popper 1976). At the same time, while Popper was profuse on how theories should be tested, he had little to say about how such theories should be formed. And when it comes to that, theoretical insights into the fast-changing and unstable complex systems that we call contemporary society are best gained by using ‘methods that would allow us to discover phenomena whose existence we were unaware of at the beginning of research’ – to quote one of the finest and most theory-relevant ethnographic studies on record (Becker et al. 1961: 18). Which brings me to a second point supporting my bold claim.

I would be greatly naïve if I would assume any degree of strict innovativeness for these two theories. We have seen similar theoretical intuitions in Simmel’s work for instance, but even more so in Goffman’s and in that of other Symbolic Interactionist sociologists (e.g. Goffman 1971; Blumer 1969). In fact, I see both theories as extensions of fundamental insights gained in Symbolic Interactionist work. These extensions, however, have a qualitative dimension which is crucial: we have added to existing theoretical intuitions an empirical grounding in a pool of evidence of fundamental social processes – social interaction. As I said at the beginning, there is a *sui generis* objectivity (read: existence as an object) to social interaction when examining society, and with the exception of some Rational Choice theorists’

imagination of a society consisting of pathologically taciturn people, any realistic form of sociological imagination demands pride of place for interaction in its phenomenology.⁸ Detailed attention to interaction, therefore, offers us a privileged view into the fine fiber of social processes, events, formations and structures. This generates evidence of something – something fundamentally social, which cannot be refuted or dismissed as ancillary without perilous leaps away from what is observable and realistic (and, I add, verifiable) into a metaphysical realm poorly supported by the available facts. So even if theories grounded in sociolinguistic evidence may not be new *pe se*, they are stronger than most others. Bourdieu, to name just one, had clearly understood that (Blommaert 2015b).

It would be good, therefore, to engage more regularly in sociolinguistic data mining in search of those elements that can provide grounds for an innovative and imaginative generalizable heuristics, in which sociolinguistic facts are, almost tautologically, converted into and rephrased as social facts – from a specialized sociology into a general sociology. I am convinced that this is not just highly useful but also badly needed.

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⁸ In Blommaert (2017) I explain how sociolinguistic evidence provides conclusive proof for Durkheim's 'social fact' – defining the very possibility of a sociology and sociolinguistics – and by extension offers crippling arguments against Rational Choice and other forms of Methodological Individualism.

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