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Superdiversity & Language: Notes from a social policy perspective

by

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Superdiversity and Language: Notes from a social policy perspective

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A social policy perspective on language

As a social policy analyst I have tended to see language as a means to an end, a mechanism for communicating need, for accessing resources, for offering help and also to some extent for signalling belonging. I'm aware that it has also become almost an institutionalised boundary to membership as well as a signifier of belonging or integration.

In my work looking at migrants' access to social welfare and integration, language comes up time and time again as the most critical factor in helping migrants to make a place for themselves in the UK (for example see Phillimore 2011a; 2012). Language, or inability to speak English, is generally the biggest barrier to accessing services, decent employment and education. There is anti-migrant rhetoric implying that migrants in the UK resist speaking English - David Cameron in 2011, for example, referred to migrants "not all of whom want to speak our language" – but my work finds that in the UK, almost all new arrivals prioritise learning English. When we recently surveyed refugees, policymakers and practitioners, it was refugees who placed speaking English at the top of the list of integration priorities. Language matters to refugees and to the other migrants we have worked with.

In our Nuffield-funded examination of refugee integration and social capital, we used bivariate and multivariate analyses to examine social network relations in a longitudinal study of refugee integration (see Cheung & Phillimore 2013), and we found that

- ability to speak English improves the number and range of social networks possessed by new refugees;
- ability to speak English improves access to employment, health, well-being and levels of satisfaction;
- ability to write English can improve access to higher quality work;
- 30% of refugees who wish and need to learn English cannot access lessons;
- those that do access lessons do not make the progress they need to speak and write in the real world.

So for refugees or for people who are here to escape persecution, it is very difficult to develop the language skills needed to get on or to gain access to citizenship and a secure future (this is confirmed in our qualitative work around ESOL). Even those who are considered to have a well-founded case of persecution and are granted five years to stay in the UK are expected to pass a language test before their leave to remain is renewed. For those migrants who wish to reunite with their family, ability to speak English or the national standard language is also becoming important, alongside income level. Data from the Migrant Integration Policy Index shows that this trend is increasing across the EU and in fact it's a vicious cycle – without an ability in the national standard language, you cannot access decent work, and without decent work you do not have enough income to reunite with your family.

No wonder there is such a strong relationship between health and ability to speak English. Refugees' entire lives depend on their being safe and secure, but in for example the Netherlands and Germany as well as the UK, their security, their place in the host country,

and the possibility of reuniting with lost partners and children depend on them and/or their family being able to speak English or the national standard language.

Overall, I think that language is something that we social policy analysts have tended to view as a problem to be overcome in our research. But in my work with Lisa Goodson, we have come to see it as a resource. We have developed a Community Research programme, training migrants to become social researchers and working with them on our projects (see Goodson & Phillimore 2010; 2012). While we have valued the cultural understanding and insiders' perspectives that these individuals brought to our work, our greatest gain has been communication with migrants that is not mediated by an interpreter. Our community researchers use their multilingual skills to help us access information that we would not be able to access in other ways. This has been very important over the years and has enabled us to hear the stories of those with severe mental health and other problems (see Phillimore 2011b). We have used the findings to try and influence policy and have had some modest successes. And we are just beginning to think about the ways in which our community researchers use language – a linguistic analysis of their interaction with interviewee would be very revealing.

A response to sociolinguistic research papers

Reading the papers and listening to the presentations at this event, I realise that linguistics has its own codes and language, and can often be quite impenetrable to the outside world. But I can also see that a linguistic lens treats language as much more than just communication or a means to membership. I started to make a list of the roles played by language, but I soon gave up as they were so extensive. My list of what language can do included:

- highlighting and helping to construct social differences and stereotypes;
- providing an observable sign that shapes impressions through association with social practices;
- implying particular class positions or ideologies;
- reproducing or undermining the existing social order;
- indicating cosmopolitanism and global citizenship; or
- implying surrender and acceptance of the imposition of a dominating yet unwelcome culture.

We have had presentations about language as a politicised resource for celebrating or authenticating diversity. The link between language and citizenship creates a marker, delineating those (non-speakers) who are seen as potentially divisive to society and those who are seen as maintaining stability. We have also heard about the different power dynamics associated with language in Korea, and the tensions between language imposed by imperialists, language scorned as a sign of collaboration, subjugation or national betrayal, and multilingualism as a status symbol that brings access to resources. But at the same time, I have also now heard about the ways that through linguistic interaction, people constantly reproduce and negotiate social distinctions, and can be comfortable inhabiting different stereotypes in different times and spaces. To me, the fluidity with which different styles and codes are used to construct and reconstruct different identities is remarkable.

In work on the internet, we have heard about the relative anonymity and disembodiment of virtual space, and this makes me realise that the internet is one of the few places where migrants can abandon phenotype and be free of what Canadians call visible minorityness. Yet even while embodiment can be abandoned, perhaps being a non-native speaker cannot.

We have also seen that in conversation, superdiversity manifests itself in much more than just translanguaging or mixing and shifting between languages. It is also evident in, for

example, the temporal frameworks that people use in conversation, and the complexity exhibited in the language use of first and second generation migrants must surely increase when people encounter others significantly different from themselves, as in an area like Birmingham where people from at least 187 different countries (not to mention ethnicities or languages) meet.

I have also realised that the English language is not just one norm against which migrants have to assess their language abilities. There are also different styles of English that are privileged in different situations. This reinforces for me the legacy of English imperialism and the continuation of language hegemony throughout much of the world, generating a non-native and native English speaker binary. This division is certainly something we see being amplified in the UK – native speaking brings an insiderness that is not possible even if you are a fluent non-native speaker. So I particularly enjoyed the discussion of counter-discourses and the cases where the reinvention or circumvention of English and standard Japanese was almost subversive, and where multilingualism rather than English featured as a hidden key to success in the *Life in the UK* citizenship test.

The realisation that linguists can learn so much about our social situation, histories, biographies, and that our linguistic repertoires give so much away about our personal biographies, is worrying to someone like myself, hanging out at a seminar full of linguists. I wonder, as I masquerade as an academic in an institution dominated by the white middle classes, how much you pick up of my working class South London background. Having at first actively, and then more sub-consciously, worked to adopt academic lingo in the early years of my academic career, I realise that I too switch linguistic repertoires. One for work, another with my pre-academia friends. I now wonder how many signs there are of my past in the way I speak when in “academic mode” – can you ever remake yourself convincingly in language? I have learned that our linguistic repertoires are not distinct ways of speaking but that they overlap and mix up.

So what can we learn about superdiversity from linguistics?

Superdiversity as a concept is relatively new, and within my own field, I tend to focus on a number of key features.

Vertovec (2007) describes superdiversity as diversity that supersedes anything we have ever previously experienced. Certainly there is evidence that diversity is happening at a scale, speed and spread that we have never seen before. More people coming from more places, to more places. But it’s what happens in the sites of superdiversity that interest me. Here we see greater complexity than before – not just more ethnicities but other factors such as migration status, age, education, class, and of course language all influencing identity and experience.

We also see greater fragmentation – we can no longer use the groupist approach that social scientists have tended to use in the past. In addition, we see that *change* has become a normal part of our existence. This change results from multiple forces, many of which are global, some of which are historical, most of which are beyond the control of our policymakers and politicians. Hence, I think, the constant attempts to control migrants and migration – ever tougher and tougher on migration, also placing greater obligations on existing minorities. But as far as I am concerned, the genie is already out of the box – superdiversity has already happened. What we need to do is understand superdiversity, and I have learned much about it in reading and listening to these papers.

It is not just our assumptions about characteristics of particular groups that have been challenged by the emergence of superdiversity. Basic ideas in linguistic analysis also need to

be set aside, and in order to avoid imposing the researchers' own assumptions about language processes, we need to look closely and carefully at the interaction of linguistic forms, situated discourse and ideology. Researching the intersections of multiple variables is the greatest challenge facing superdiversity researchers, and in the analyses of communication presented at this seminar, we have seen how this might be done at the micro level. We now need to examine how we can explore such intersectionality at a greater scale.

It is also now clear that multilingualism is not the simultaneous ability to communicate in two or more separate linguistic systems (as I had previously thought). Rather, language in an era of superdiversity is a set of resources utilised by different social actors in different ways in different social contexts. And how should we describe a situation in which multilingualism becomes the norm, where people speak numerous languages with different origins (ie African and EU languages), live transnational existences both corporeally and virtually connected to family in different continents across the world, each with their own evolving linguistic repertoires? As people continually move between social roles as parents, volunteers, workers and co-religionists, sometimes all at the same time, do we describe these as bi-furcated lives? Or are they superdiverse lives?

As the analysis of internet interaction reveals, transnationalism, social media and the internet now mean that not only is practice influenced by the superdiverse-local, but that the superdiverse-local influences practice in global connections. This to-ing and fro-ing of influence and outcome means that linguistic change, the evolution of language and the production of new glocal patterns is increasingly becoming the norm. In fact, there is enormous potential for exploring superdiversity in/through the internet, which is surely a space of intense social relations, identity formation and reformation, political engagement, education and so much more. IRiS academics are currently working on a proposal looking at the role of social media in supporting migrant integration and resilience, and we have also built social media dimensions into other proposals currently under consideration. Hopefully, we'll have more to say about this at some point soon.

So much of the learning that emerges from these papers comes from observing people in naturalistic settings. I wonder how much social policy would gain from observing interaction between migrant or minority people and service providers, shifting our focus from questions, interviews and data. Time, I think, for an ethnographic turn in social policy and for a focus on process as well as outcome. We often tend to deconstruct language, reduce migrants and minorities to numbers (stocks and flows) and fret about their impact. But we have seen in the seminar that even relatively new speakers of English can make agentic contributions to local sociolinguistic processes, and superdiversity researchers would do well to look elsewhere for these agentic contributions – beyond the impact on GDP and local housing markets. What do migrants as interactive humans bring to our culture and society (beyond the example of chicken *tikka masala* as Britain's national dish that is rolled out as a tokenistic example of the benefits of diversity). It's clear that interactions between cultures have, and continue, to make language – and possibly all other aspects of culture. In this regard, researchers in the arts, humanities and social sciences have much they can learn from linguists, and perhaps it's time to apply the superdiversity lens far more widely.

Finally as a social policy researcher I can't finish without at least a brief word about policy. With the assimilationist turn in many countries, we have heard how multilingualism has been viewed as a threat, but in the case study of migrants tackling the *Life in the UK* citizenship test, we have seen how multilingualism can be used as a resource for learning and integration. Surely we could do so much more with these resources – we need to be exploring how to utilise, celebrate and benefit from multilingualism. This is particularly important in language education, because as I discussed earlier, our existing ESOL approach is failing learners (see Phillimore 2011c). But it also has implications for interpreting and

translation in state institutions, where the current model is failing minority groups and becoming a burgeoning expense. I don't have the answer to how multilingualism can play a role in addressing some of these problems, but I'm sure there is a role for linguists in helping us to move forward.

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APPENDIX: DETAILS OF THE SEMINAR

*Conceptualizing multilingualism under superdiversity:
Membership claims, social categories, and emblems of authenticity,*

hosted by
MOSAIC Centre for Research on Multilingualism
and
IRIS, the Institute for Research on Superdiversity
University of Birmingham
(sponsored by BAAL/CUP and LEF)
11-12 June 2013

Presentations:

Blackledge, Adrian and Angela Creese: 'You can tell he's public school': Metapragmatic stereotypes as systems of distinction

Escott, Hugh and Kate Pahl: Language as talisman: Realising materialisations of dialect

Khan, Kamran: Ideological Becoming as an entry point to investigating belonging and community

Koven, Michele: Between skepticism and credulity: Interdiscursivity, stance, and social category in Luso-Descendants' talk about the supernatural

Lo, Adrienne: How not to learn English in South Korea: Gender, modernity, and multilingualism

Rampton, Ben: Styling in a language learned later in life

Tagg, Caroline: Negotiating social roles in semi-public online contexts

Vakser, Sabina: Voices of Russia: The making of a band