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Document version:
Peer reviewed version

Publication date:
2014

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Blommaert, J., Westinen, E. E., & Leppänen, S. (2014). *Further notes on sociolinguistic scales*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 89).

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Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 89

Further notes on sociolinguistic scales

by

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© January 2014

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Introduction: the study

In this short paper, we wish to reflect on the notion of sociolinguistic scales, initially developed in Blommaert (2007, 2010). We make these reflections on the basis of elements from Elina Westinen's doctoral research on "Authenticity in Finnish hip hop" (Westinen *etc* 2014, supervisors Leppänen and Blommaert). In this dissertation, Westinen investigates the complex and polycentric constructions of what it means to be 'authentic' as a rapper in Finland, drawing on the work of three Finnish rap artists: Cheek, Pyhimys, and Stepa.

In the study, the lyrics of the artists are examined, and this analysis shows how all of them invoke a kind of "ideological topography" of Finland. Distinctions between centers – Helsinki, the capital of Finland, for instance – and peripheries – the municipality of Sodankylä in Lapland, for instance – appear as powerful meaning making resources in the songs, not merely indicative of spatiotemporal differences (Helsinki being a metropole characterized by fast and versatile life versus the slow rural and isolated life in marginal Sodankylä), but also of differences in identity, style, taste (the cosmopolitan, Helsinki-based mainstream rapper Cheek versus the laidback, rural, marginal rapper Stepa from Sodankylä) and in describing trajectories of success (the move away from peripheries towards centers).

The analysis of the rappers' lyrics, thus, reveals a complex set of meaningful semiotic distinctions between centers and peripheries, locality and translocality, all operating within one "benchmark" scale: Finland. The analysis of the long interviews done by Westinen with the three rappers, shows how, within this

Finnish scalar universe, the three rappers assume very different positions, both vis-à-vis each other (they are more or less familiar with each others' work) and vis-à-vis hip hop culture at large. The image appearing here is that of fractality and polycentricity: there appears to be an almost infinite possibility for introducing more scales-within-scales: While Helsinki is the undisputed center of Finland, it has its own peripheries, and the geographical peripheries of Finland may have their own centers.

The study, however, yielded more fundamental insights with regard to what scales can mean as elements in the theoretical toolkit of a sociolinguistics of globalization. We will sketch these in what follows; but let us first look back on some of the early formulations of scale.

Underdeveloped scales

The 2007 paper "Sociolinguistic scales" by Blommaert has its origins in research done in 2004-2005 with Jim Collins and Stef Slembrouck (e.g. 2005a, 2005b), and it emerged as a working paper clarifying some ideas informally discussed during joint workshops. Inspired by literature from social geography and world-systems analysis, it attempted to render scale useful *as a feature of meaning making* in human interaction; more precisely as *an instrument by means of which subjects bring order in their semiotizations of the social and material world*. Such semiotizations are usually labeled "context" in sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic work: whenever people communicate they draw on potentially meaningful contextual inferences, anticipating – the proleptic dimension of all communication – that such inferences will also be available to their interlocutors. Scale, it was sensed, might be a way of pointing towards the complex distinctions people make *within* "context", between things that are widely presupposable and things that are not, widely available meanings and others, normative meanings and others – distinctions within acts of meaning making between things that are *of a different order*, leading us to realize the non-unified nature of meaning-making and the risks in an age of globalization to

situate “errors” and “misunderstandings” at just one level of social experience and activity.

The semiotic orientation of this notion of sociolinguistic scales is important and deserves emphasis (also because that semiotic orientation was quite often overlooked by readers of the 2007 paper). The point is to say something about *meaning making*, about distinctions *within* meaning, given the changing contextual universes of globalization. Scales are “semiotized space and time” – the ways in which space-time dimensions of social life determine meanings and vice versa.

The 2007 paper was a clumsy and altogether unsuccessful attempt, achieving perhaps little more than a measure of acceptance of the necessity to consider the non-unified nature of meaning-making in a sociolinguistics of globalization. Several attempts towards refining the notion were undertaken (see notably Collins, Slembrouck & Baynham 2009; see Kell 2013 for a critical survey).¹ Some authors tried to stick closely to spatial aspects of communication – scale as the distributional scope of discourses, for instance – while others were satisfied to see scale as a way of capturing type-token relationships in language (making every instance of meaning-making, of meaningful uptake by an interlocutor, an instance of scale), or of a way of connecting single utterances – the ‘micro’ aspect of sociolinguistics – with norms, standards, policies and institutions, the ‘macro’ aspects.

All of those attempts obviously have their merits and shortcomings; yet it would be unwise to claim that any of them provided conclusive arguments demonstrating the usefulness of scale as a sociolinguistic concept with unique analytic and theoretical purchase. The original ambition behind the use of the notion, described above as aimed at providing a more precise idea of how people semiotize features of a different order within their social and material context,

¹ At the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, November 2013, two entire panels engaged with issues of scale.

remains unfulfilled. In what follows, we will offer what could perhaps count as a further, hopefully useful, step in developing the notion in that specific sense.

Scale as scope of understandability

The central empirical ambition of Westinen's study is to describe hip hop in Finland as a polycentric phenomenon, in which artists orient not towards one 'central' set of meaningful indexical diacritics but to multiple centers, and in which these centers are dispersed over different scales. Before moving on, a word or two is required on the notion of indexicality; inspiration for elaborating this notion is drawn from Silverstein (2003, 2006); Blommaert (2005) and Agha (2007).

Indexicality is the dimension of meaning in which textual features "point to" (index) contextually retrievable meanings. More concretely: every utterance carries apart from "pure" (denotational) meanings a range of sociocultural meanings, derived from widespread assumptions about the meanings signaled by the features of the utterance. Thus, "substandard" utterances – a foreign accent or a dialect accent – may invoke stereotypical identity characteristics of marginality, low levels of education, the countryside versus the city, a lack of cultural and intellectual sophistication and so forth. Possibly every feature of speech can be an indexical for some range of inferencable associative and stereotypical meanings.

The point is, however, that such indexicals do not occur and operate at random, but display complex and dynamic forms of "order": sets of indexicals operate along each other in ways that suggest sociocultural coherence. For instance: when we have qualified someone's speech as indexical of a rural and culturally unsophisticated background – a country bumpkin talking – we do not usually expect that person to provide elaborate and highly nuanced discourses on "sophisticated" topics such as expensive French wines or the paintings of Matisse. Such forms of indexical order create broader frames of expectation with regard to meaning: we expect coherent sociocultural meanings to follow in an

orderly fashion. And when we communicate, we will have to delve into the reservoir of such coherent frames, hoping that they are shared by our interlocutors and that, consequently, what we say “makes sense” to them. We thus see scales as *a particular form of indexical order*. But before that point is made, something more needs to be said on scale itself.

As we know, the notion of scale is originally closely tied to space and time, and in the literature, scale is often seen as spatiotemporal scope; hence the current usage of distinctions such as “local” and “global” when discussing scales. In taking scale into sociolinguistic theorizing, however, Blommaert (2010: 34) defined it as “semiotized space and time”. How this semiotization actually has to be imagined, we have seen, remains largely underdeveloped. Which is where we need to turn to Westinen’s illuminating study.

As a first step towards an empirical clarification of the semiotized nature of space and time, and in line with the initial semiotic orientation of the notion, let us propose that sociolinguistic scales can best be understood in terms of *the spatiotemporal scope of understandability*; we are thus looking at the *degrees* to which particular signs can be expected to be understandable, and “semiotized space-time” stands for the way in which space and time define the scope of meaningful semiotic activity.

Thus, in Western Europe more people would have a set of inferences about places such as London and Paris (even if they have never visited these places) than, say, on places such as Bielefeld in Germany or Gijon in Spain. Speaking about Bielefeld and Gijon, consequently, will require more and more detailed and explicit information than speaking about Paris and London, since we can expect more people to have readily available (stereotypical) associations about Paris and London than about Bielefeld and Gijon. Paris and London are more *presupposable* as signs than Bielefeld and Gijon. Paris and London, consequently, semiotically operate on a higher scale than Bielefeld and Gijon. Similar scale effects can be expected whenever we mention Christ – a sign presupposable to all Christians regardless of denomination – than about, say, Saint Ambrose or the

Dominican Order – signs belonging to the Catholic tradition *within* Christianity. And we can also expect more people to have inferences about Shakespeare than, say, about the Finnish author Sofi Oksanen.

The spatiotemporal scope of understandability – our understanding of sociolinguistic scales – is a crucial instrument in a sociolinguistics of globalization, because the globalized flows of semiotic material can be expected to create new scales and more complex forms of multiscalarity. Much of Westinen’s study documents such complexities: we can see how three hip hop artists develop scalar frames in their work, and how such scalar frames can then be *redeployed* in discourses about themselves and other artists, about the quality of what they and others do, and about what it means to be an ‘authentic’ rapper in Finland. Or more precisely: how the delicate projections of scalar frames make up the core of what they understand by ‘authenticity’, and how these scalar projections and understandings of authenticity are *different* in each case, revealing a fundamentally polycentric Finnish hip hop scene.

Two different scalar effects

This latter point emerged out of reflections on what initially looked like a problem of inconsistency in the study. Like most other researchers on hip hop (and popular music cultures more generally), Westinen had originally intended to focus the analysis on the lyrics written by the artists. Fieldwork interviews were, in this design, conceived as *secondary* data, useful for examining what the artists “really meant” in their lyrics.

While following this design, however, we started noticing something. The construction of scalar frames is overt and evident in the lyrics of the artists. The rappers all weave intricate references to what we call an ‘ideological topography’ of Finland into their songs: references to the geographical, but also social and cultural margins and centers of Finland, stereotypical distinctions between places, people, characteristics and activities within a Finnish horizon. Finland is a scale level within which the three rappers construct a clear, overt and (within

Finland) widely presupposable set of indexical and hierarchical distinctions that “make sense” to themselves and to their audiences, and that project their own chosen formats of authenticity. They all very much speak from within Finland.

When looking at the long interviews with the rappers, however, something different emerged. The rappers *absorb* the indexical distinctions deployed in their lyrics and largely driven by an ideological topography of Finland; and they use these distinctions *as indexical resources for addressing a variety of other topics*. More precisely: on the basis of delicate ideological-topographical distinctions, the rappers build a set of scalar frames in their lyrics that create different degrees of locality and translocality as part of their ‘authentic’ hip hop songs; their authenticity is projected by the indexical ordering of these specific semiotic materials. Once these scalar frames are in place, however, they can *in turn* become the semiotic materials by means of which *different* discursive distinctions can emerge: distinctions of artistic quality, of character, of relative position within the Finnish hip hop scene and the global hip hop scene at large.

The patterns we encountered in the interviews remind us of an older paper by Michael Silverstein (1985), in which he examines a conversation between two students newly enrolled at the University of Chicago. While Silverstein’s paper focuses on theoretical and methodological issues of ethnopoetic analysis, the material he presents closely resembles the materials in Westinen’s study: the two students elaborately refer to places such as “Iowa”, “Loyola University” or “Georgetown”, and Silverstein shows how the dense ideological-topographical indexicalities of these places create a system of indexical attribution in talking about entirely different issues. While the talk is not *about* these places, the indexical order *invoked by* these places contributes to the construction of meanings on other subjects. And these second-level meanings are again scalar: the degree of presupposability of, for instance, “Georgetown University” as a place where academic quality is taken for granted is higher than that of, for instance, the University of Iowa. Mentioning “Georgetown University” can consequently become more presupposable as an argument for being well prepared for the standards of the University of Chicago than mentioning

“University of Iowa”; and it would also pass easier as a suggestion of being a bright student or a scion of a wealthy family.

The almost accidental byproduct of the work reported in Westinen’s study is thus that we can see *how already ordered indexicalities can themselves become elements of another order*; how presupposable meanings can in turn contribute to the presupposability of other meanings; how semiotic output (a finished meaning product) can become input (raw meaning material) in other semiotic processes; how semiotic effects can become conditions for other effects. Rather than an either-or script of analysis in which scalarity is located either in the lyrics or in the interviews, or of a cumulative one in which scalar effects occur in both, we get a *sequential and hierarchical* outcome, in which one type of sociocultural activity – the production of hip hop lyrics – generates a register of scalar semiotic resources which proves to produce *another level* of scalarity in another type of sociocultural activity: metacommentary by the rappers on their work, status, and identity.

Scalar distinctions, we can see, become elements of other evaluative distinctions, now infused by the power of the earlier scalar effects. Cheek, for instance, can invoke his cosmopolitan Helsinki basis as an argument to demonstrate his vastly superior musical and technical erudition over Stepa, whose roots are in the remote, far northern municipality of Sodankylä; but Cheek – who moved into Helsinki from Lahti (a town located 100 km north from Helsinki – can in turn be qualified as “not really from Helsinki” by Pyhimys, who is born and bred there and whose activities in the musical field extend far beyond hip hop. “Being from Helsinki”, therefore, allows the indexicals of “Helsinki-ness” to be played out in a wide variety of ways and from a range of speaker positions – the translocally presupposable nature of these indexicals makes such forms of deployment possible, it makes them iterative and productive. Similar claims made on grounds of “Sodankylä-ness”, in contrast, cannot be made without elaborate and explicit motivation. The scope of understandability of the former is far larger than that of the latter.

We begin to see how scalar distinctions can explain degrees of productivity or iterativity of semiotic resources. The more widely accessible semiotic resources, the ones that carry the most widely presupposable indexical orders, will be vastly more productive and iterative than less widely presupposable ones. This takes scale way beyond type-token relationships – every meaning effect involves a type-token projection, so we risk a tautology if we see every type-token projection as an instance of scale. Instead, the focus here is on *qualitative distinctions* between meaning effects. And it also takes scales out of the rather unproductive complex of spatial metaphorizations: we're looking at *scale as a qualitative feature of meaning-making*.

In a context of globalization, where the scope of understandability becomes a pressing concern – and an urgent problem – for large numbers of people and the meanings they attempt to make moving through the sociolinguistic regimes of different places on earth, this semiotic focus is mandatory. The fact of mobility itself is not to be overlooked; but it must be well understood that sociolinguistically, such translocal mobility is a *condition* generating localized *effects* that are themselves still insufficiently understood.

Scale and complexity

We can extend a methodological caution at this point. Westinen could never have found the layered, sequential and hierarchical structure of scalarity if she had restricted her investigation to just one set of data and one method of analysis – the careful discourse analysis of rap lyrics, for instance. It was when we realized that the interview data – originally planned to be simply secondary data scaffolding and thickening the analysis of the lyrics – offered a very different range of issues and displayed very different scalar phenomena, related to but also relatively autonomous from the ones detected in the lyrics, that we began to see the complexity of the meaning potential generated by scalar frames.

We could not have detected on the basis of the lyrics alone the ways in which differences in the scope of understandability of specific discursive features

contribute to the construction and projection of identities, of evaluative judgments of others' character and work and of relative positionings of rappers within a particular horizon of popular culture. Conversely, if the analysis had been based on the interviews alone, the ideological-topographical frames would probably be seen as "primary" indexical materials rather than the second-order materials they now proved to be, and we would have failed to spot the very significant differences in the indexical ordering that went on in both activities. Scales could easily be identified as "content organizers" of hip hop lyrics. These lyrical content organizers, however, quickly showed tendencies to become "contents" to be "organized" again, and in a different way, in the interviews. It was, thus, the plurality of data sets and approaches to them that enabled scalarity itself to emerge as a complex and dynamic system that defies simple and static images of "local versus global" or "type versus token".

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