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## Paper 95

### **Super-diversity & Sociolinguistics – a digest**

by

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## **Super-diversity & sociolinguistics – a digest**

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‘Super-diversity’ was defined by Vertovec (2006; 2010) and is widely taken up by others, not in the least by sociolinguists (Blommaert and Rampton 2011). This uptake indicates that super-diversity is gradually opening new terrains of investigation and beginning to raise new methodological and theoretical questions in the social and political sciences as well as in the humanities (Arnaut 2013; Blommaert 2012).

In essence, the concept of super-diversity seeks to qualify the new condition of transnationalism ever since the global flows of people have been profoundly changing both quantitatively and qualitatively. While the amount of people migrating keeps rising at a steadily growing pace, the migration flows have radically diversified. This diversification applies not only to the range of migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries, but also to the socio-economic, cultural, religious, and linguistic profiles of the migrants as well as to their civil status and their migration trajectories.

The sociolinguists with a keen interest in globalisation and mobility contend that the present-day complexity and diversity of migration flows is paralleled by that of global cultural and linguistic flows (Jørgensen, et al. 2011; Leppänen 2012). The latter have also profoundly intensified in volume as well as in the way they suffuse people’s communicative activities, and many facets of their private and public, social and cultural lives. Key to this development is the mobile turn in information and communication technologies.

The watershed moment in both the migration and communication dimensions of the new condition of transnationalism is situated around 1990.

### **New transnationalism**

The late nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties saw major geo-political changes coinciding with those of rapid communications technology and the maturing of the digital age. There was the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, which Ernest Gellner called the most momentous occasion since the French revolution; the ensuing collapse of communism in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; its conversion to a new kind of capitalism in China following that country’s reforms of the 1980s; the remarkably swift effect of India’s own

economic reforms; and the ending of apartheid in South Africa. That these politico-economic events occurred within a few years of each other is a good illustration of the global knock-on effects of crises in relation to each other.

These factors have altered the nature of migration worldwide. Added to older migratory patterns, either deriving from the host country's imperial past or from post-WWII state-regulated labour migrations, are new migrations of smaller groups from a wider number of sending countries. Post-communist migrants from eastern Europe seek work and settlement in the European Union, while migration flows from Central Asia to eastern Europe grow in magnitude and diversity. South-to-south migration has grown alongside existing (but equally changing) south-to-north patterns. For instance, following the ending of apartheid, South Africa has become the destination as well as the hub of increased migration flows from other African countries as has China from countries all over the world, including Africa.

The acceleration and multiplication of such new movements of people is a kind of stepping stone to an increasingly transnational world connected by digital communication technology. New migrations and diasporas have indeed been accompanied by the increasing use of mobile phones and other 'smart' devices in combination with the internet. On-going miniaturisation and grassroots accessibility are two major aspects of the communication technology's booming spread and mobility. At which pace and to what a geographic extent the global digital revolution has accelerated could be recently measured from the immense success of the cell phone-based social medium MXIT in South Africa (Velghe 2011), or more spectacularly, the mass mobilisations during e.g. the London riots and the Arab Spring.

Of course, throughout the twentieth century international communication and mass-media (radio and television) were important vectors of globalisation, but current mobile interactive technologies have seen this drastically fragmented and individualised. Likewise, the burgeoning new patterns of international population movement which consist of new, smaller and more ethno-culturally diverse groups of migrants caulked upon earlier, long-standing migratory patterns. In this sense the 'super' in 'super-diversity' can be taken to refer to the superimposition of older upon newer 'diversities' and their mutual re-articulation in the process. Everywhere around the world, the interaction of 'the' autochthonous population with different generations and groups of migrants, engenders the cultural differentiation of the former. In South Africa the collapse of the racial boundaries has in itself given rise to new configurations which Nuttall (2009: 20) calls 'entanglements'.

These different shifts in the making, punctuated by savage government curbs redefines ineluctably and irreversibly the very idea of a self-recognising population everywhere around the globe. Unsurprisingly, these shifts demand for new ways of repartitioning and classifying populations, in other words new diversity models.

## **Beyond multiculturalism**

Contrary to the present transnationalism, the earlier pre-WWII or pre-decolonisation phase of globalisation, politico-economic and socio-cultural diversity were seen as made up of supposedly discrete elements. The national, ethnic or religious groups were conceived to exist alongside each other. They had not yet so merged as to lose their respective remembered lines of differentiation. A case in point are the relatively regimented labour migrations from the Mediterranean to Western Europe of the after-war decades which stand in stark contrast to the relative unruly and more disruptive post-1990 new migrations from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

The earlier diversity or multiculturalism regimes – with colonial population management and apartheid as its most extreme expressions –, were really those of parallelisms and pluralities: ethnic and cultural pluralism, medical and linguistic pluralism referred in liberal quarters to the side-by-side relations of distinctive entities or knowledges. Their constituents and proponents were encouraged to celebrate their distinctiveness and, despite real differences between them of power, privilege and resources, to take their place as equals before each other. Ideologies cannot last for long without material or substantive reinforcement, however. Cross-cut by increasing inequalities, the ideal-based pluralisms gave way at their edges to fuzzy boundaries or no boundaries at all.

The concept of super-diversity tries to capture the manifold implications of this alleged development from the co-existing, side-to-side (and sometimes back-to-back) relations of relatively bounded entities to the reverberative, criss-crossing and subdivision of different parts of these entities. Together with other disciplines, contemporary sociolinguistics engages with the evident repercussions of this shift on linguistic and cultural production.

## **Super-diversity in sociolinguistic research**

Sociolinguistics has a long-standing record in analysing and interpreting linguistic diversity albeit until recently within the ‘old’ multiculturalist, or rather, multilingualist mould. It typically associated the use of languages and varieties of languages with more or less stable and clearly positioned (eg working-class or elite) socio-cultural groups or ‘speech communities’ while setting apart the combination of languages in one conversation as code-switching or code-mixing (Parkin 1974).

Replacing the worn-out multilingualist model with a more dynamic one but retaining the sophisticated ethnographic methods and critical stance of earlier sociolinguistics (Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Parkin 2012), Rampton (2005) analysed forms of crossover speech or crossing, in which a range of diverse linguistic particles are borrowed, transformed, returned and employed as communicative ‘resources’. The resources make up what Blommaert and Backus (2011) call speech ‘repertoires’ and are deployed in what Jørgensen and others

(2011) call ‘polylinguaging’ and Creese and Blackledge (2010) using García’s term, call ‘translinguaging’.

Such processes are more than just code-switching. Speakers use constantly changing communicative resources: verbal, audio, visual and bodily. They have to make themselves understood while keeping up to date with the most recent styles and registers of communication. Varis and Wang (2011) aptly refer to a struggle between the semiotic creativity that is expected of speakers in super-diversity and the need to retain some normative stability in communication in order to be understood. It is a delicate balance. As Rampton (2011) showed for urban Britain, on the one hand ethnicity from the 1980s and 1990s gave way to social class as a driver of youth speech. On the other hand, this new class-based speech was not stable but was heterogeneous. It was made up of different speech styles which crossed, so to speak, backwards and forwards into each other. More than this, such heterogeneous urban vernaculars have lasted beyond speakers’ youth and into their middle age.

In other words, in some of the sociolinguistic literature, super-diversity refers to the very rapid circulation of constantly changing semiotic variables which do not necessarily settle into more stable varieties, indexing stable identities. Furthermore, vernacular urban youth speech does no longer give way in later life to more received speech styles. Rather, they exist along more settled varieties, spoken or at least advocated by members of the so-called ‘establishment’ such as professionals and mobile middle classes, so creating further layers of complexity.

Apart from face-to-face communication, contemporary sociolinguistics looks into semiotic complexity in Internet-based communication, socialization and learning. Sirpa Leppänen and her collaborators have been looking into how participants bring into play different voices and different styles in a wide-range of internet-based activities such as YouTube videos, gaming, blogging and vlogging, Facebook and other social media interaction, etc.. This fascinating line of research reveals the creativity and sophistication with which (often) young people express a myriad of affective, social, and cultural alignments and affinities with preferences and role models, movements and hypes, styles and ideas, all over the globe (Leppänen 2012).

A third sector of sociolinguistic research is linguistic landscaping which documents and analyses commercial or other forms of writing and printing in public space. This research shares with the new media research a sustained interest in literacy and design, but differs in the former’s attention to space and the material side of public literacy (Stroud and Mpendukana 2009). For Blommaert (2012: 23) linguistic landscaping research is a particularly powerful tool to rapidly assess or otherwise profoundly gauge the complexity of globalised neighbourhoods which he designates as “complex of infrastructures for superdiversity”.

In sum, these and other lines of research in the sociolinguistics of superdiversity are addressing the different levels at which diversity plays out: (a) communicative practices that constitute emergent forms of conviviality and rooted cosmopolitanism, (b) diversity and integration discourses in the corporate and public sector and the ideologies they enshrine about language norms, (c) more generally, the emergence of normativity in a polycentric world in which traditional normative centres (nation-state apparatuses) are just one among many, and finally (d) (at the theoretical level) conceptualising some of the key-notions of super-diversity, such as complexity, unpredictability, and indeed, diversity.

For some of these references, see Arnaut (2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Also.