Durkheim and the Internet:
On sociolinguistics and the sociological imagination

by

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Abstract

Sociolinguists have rarely attempted to draw the social-theoretical implications from their findings, and in spite of the tremendous theoretical relevance of sociolinguistic insights, most sociolinguists themselves continue to rely on established, mainstream forms of sociological imagination – often at odds with their own results. In this text, I explore the ways in which contemporary sociolinguistics can contribute to a new sociological imagination, and I use Emile Durkheim’s work as the take-off point for this exercise. Durkheim – one of the founding fathers of sociology – emphasized the crucial importance of normativity in his work, and saw normativity itself as “the social fact”. Normativity was collective and compelling, and thus provided the glue to hold diverse segments of society together in forms of social cohesion and integration. His view of the social fact became the foundation for defining the very possibility of sociology, and by extension sociolinguistics as well. It was dismissed, however, in the tradition called Rational Choice.

After outlining Durkheim’s concept of the social fact, I engage with the Durkheimian legacy in two ways. One, I use contemporary sociolinguistic empirical findings as arguments to demonstrate the validity of the social fact, and eo ipso the absurdity of Rational Choice. The very nature of language as a sociolinguistic system revolving around ordered indexical patterns renders impossible any methodologically-individualistic approach, and basic facts about language variation and sociolinguistic inequality suffice to establish that. Sociolinguistics, thus, provides extensive empirical arguments in favor of the possibility of a sociology grounded in collective normatively organized sociality. Having established that, I can proceed to the second layer. Most mainstream sociology – Durkheim’s included – theorized an “offline” world, and contemporary sociolinguistics can offer a range of new theories based on the growing body of empirical work on the online-offline nexus. Such
work, quite often, penetrates into the deep fibers of new, emerging or transforming social processes, and can thus be made relevant for higher-level theorizing. On the basis of such work, I formulate a range of “grounded” theories that can henceforth be used as hypotheses in further research: on norms, social action, identity, groups, integration, structure and power. Together, I argue, they maximize the potential of sociolinguistics to comprehensively theorize what Appadurai defined as the new phase of modernity we inhabit: vernacular globalization.
1. Sociolinguists as sociologists

Over two decades ago, the Welsh sociologist Glyn Williams (1992) wrote a devastating review of the sociological underpinnings of the sociolinguistics of his day. His findings were (not to put too fine a point on it) that sociolinguistics was often a combination of very good and even avant-garde linguistics with conventional sociology. So, while sociolinguists appeared as leaders and innovators in the field of advanced linguistic analysis, they would be mere followers in the field of sociological reflection, happy to adopt, often implicitly and without much questioning or motivation, mainstream forms of “sociological imagination” (cf. Mills 1959). This led to images of society characterized by social integration, social consensus and cooperation, the relative stability of social relations and identities, and clearly delineated national units and group identities as circumscriptions for analysis – recipes from the kitchen of Talcott Parsons, according to Glyn Williams.

It is certainly true that sociolinguists have by and large avoided discussing major theoretical issues in sociology and social science, and have been extremely prudent in explaining the big sociological issues that may emerge from their work. This is a great pity, since contemporary sociolinguistic work does often yield insights that are challenging mainstream sociological assumptions, and do so at a fundamental level – the level at which, to quote C. Wright Mills (1959: 5), “the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated”. The level, in short, at which we can form a “sociological re-imagination”, a re-imagination of our fundamental conceptions of humans and their social lives. In this text, I intend to undertake a modest attempt in that direction.

The main motive driving this attempt has already been given: contemporary sociolinguistics is sociologically relevant. And the reason behind this can be picked up quickly while reading sociological classics: they invariably refer to patterns of interaction as fundamental to whatever is understood by social relationships, social structure or social process – and usually

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1 In this text, I shall use the term “sociolinguistics” as a broadly descriptive umbrella term including any approach in which the connections between language and society are systematically explored and in which communication is seen as an activity not reducible to the production of cognitive content. Work to be discussed in what follows might, consequently, more conventionally labeled as linguistic anthropology, pragmatics, applied linguistics, discourse analysis and so forth – and disciplinary sociolinguistics.

2 There are some notable exceptions; see e.g. Fairclough 1992; Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Coupland 2016; Flores, Spotti & Garcia 2017; Perez-Milans 2017.
also grant great importance to this. To quote just one of them, this is how Georg Simmel defined the task of sociology:

“The sociology asks what happens to men and by what rules they behave, not insofar as they unfold their understandable individual existences in their totalities, but insofar as they form groups and are determined by their group existence because of interaction.”

(Simmel 1950: 11, emphasis added)

Yet, with a mere handful of exceptions, they pay hardly any attention to the actual nature and features of such patterns of interaction. Sociolinguists do just that, it’s our profession. And systematic attention to communicative modes and processes, we shall see, has the potential to reveal the weakness of certain commonly adopted sociological assumptions and conclusions. It is my conviction that the “socio” in “sociolinguistics” involves the responsibility to work from language towards society. What eventually needs to be clarified and explained, through the analysis of sociolinguistic processes, is society and how humans operate in it and construct it. This becomes increasingly pressing as our field of study is changing from “offline” communication in a precisely circumscribed social space to include rapidly evolving and changing delocalized “online” communication, with its well-recorded challenges to established analytical frameworks. I want to encourage my fellow sociolinguists to take that responsibility seriously: we do have something to say that transcends the narrow confines of our own field of inquiry, and we should say it. Sociolinguists are, whether they like it or not, specialized sociologists.

In my attempt, I will use Emile Durkheim’s work as my benchmark. Why? Not just because of its pervasive influence on Parsons. From reading Durkheim’s work I found that his lasting influence across a broad swath of social and human sciences is often underestimated. It is in his work that the fundamental imagery of Man and society was constructed that became the perimeter, so to speak, within which twentieth-century social thought moved and developed. And even if later scholars dismissed his work or claimed to be free of his influence, they still adopted some of its fundamental principles. We’re all, in many and often surprising ways,

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4 Some would say: microsociologists. But for reasons that have to do with the very nature of language, to be discussed at length in what follows, I tend to have strong reservations regarding that facile micro-macro dichotomy. See Collins (1981).
still Durkheimians. And in what follows, I intend to work with Durkheim in two different ways.

One, in support of Durkheim, I wish to add to, and refine, a notion he saw as absolutely foundational for sociology as a science: le fait social, the social fact. This notion, when Durkheim first formulated it, was highly contested (to the extent that Durkheim spent most of the preface to the second edition of Les Règles de la Méthode sociologique defending and clarifying it: Durkheim 1895 [2010]). It was also rejected in what came to be known as Rational Choice Theory and, more generally, it clashed with the tradition of Methodological Individualism. The notion of social fact, of course, determines the possibility of a definition of “the social” as a sphere of phenomena and processes that cannot be reduced to constituent parts without losing much of their essence. Thus, it also preconditions the very possibility of a sociology and a sociolinguistics. A highly precise and analytically powerful view of the social fact is possible if we excerpt some advanced sociolinguistic work, I shall argue.

Two, we need also to step away from Durkheim and the world he tried to make sense of and consider our own. There are things now that Durkheim couldn’t possibly have known or predicted, and contemporary sociolinguistic work on internet phenomena raises several entirely new fundamental questions about the nature of social groups, social relations and social processes and permits new hypotheses in these domains. By combining this second exercise with the first one, we arrive at a number of fundamental propositions – at theory, in other words – that may contribute to work in several other disciplines, and that has been generated inductively by detailed empirical attention to the facts of language, interaction, communication. Of which we know that they are absolutely central to any social phenomenon. Or at least: let’s try to establish that.

I do not suggest here that we are only Durkheimians: we’re also, equally unwittingly, Weberians, Marxians and Freudians for instance. I choose Durkheim as a point of reference because some of the fundamental concepts he designed are highly useful in the particular exercise I shall undertake here. And as a gesture to express that sociolinguistics, as I see it, has some things to say on fundamental sociological and social-theoretical questions.

Throughout this attempt, I will follow Garfinkel’s understanding of Durkheim (shared by several others) as concerned with empirical detail rather than conceptual generalization, and with what Durkheim called “the objective reality of social facts” as something that can be demonstrated by attending to concrete, situated and embodied instances of social (inter-) action (see e.g. Garfinkel 2002). There are, therefore, aspects of Durkheim’s work that I shall not mention and discussions on the interpretation of his work that I shall not involve myself in, for I do not need all of Durkheim’s work nor any interpretation of it in order to make the points I intend to make.
2. Durkheim’s social fact

Emile Durkheim devoted his life to the self-conscious construction of sociology as a science, and by the end of his life, he had achieved that goal. In his view, scientific sociology was a necessity in fin-de-siècle France. Durkheim shared the widespread sense of discomfort of his compatriots, epitomized in the military defeat against German forces in 1870 leading both to the end of the second Empire and to the revolution of the Paris Commune. Society-as-we-knew-it appeared to be falling apart. People had become weak, decadent, hedonistic and individualistic, and a generation-long process of industrialization, with the growth of a large urban proletariat in mushrooming cities, had disrupted France’s national sociocultural cohesion, and hence had prejudiced its future as a strong nation. Sociology, for Durkheim, was one of the tools needed to reconstruct a sense of membership among the French, of a community that was characterized by specific and exceptional features – to be discovered by scientific sociology and to be spread throughout France by a new system of “moral education” (the title of his celebrated course of lectures: Durkheim 1961 [2002]). This sociology was, thus, aspirational and prescriptive, a sort of “ortho-sociology”; rather than to just describe what was there, Durkheim set out to convert factual description into normative prescription in view of constructing a society that, in his understanding, was not yet there.\(^7\)

2.1 Norms and concepts

This normative-prescriptive aspect is a point we need to remember, for it explains the particular focus of Durkheim’s sociology, norms; or to be more precise: the secular moral order that should characterize the rational, industrial and science-based French society of the 3rd Republic. The existence of such an order – implicit and often invisible in everyday life – was what Durkheim posited as “the social fact” that made his sociology possible; and the vigorous promotion, spread and enforcement of this order was the nation-building task of the modern French state, via its education system. Eventually, this rational civic moral order should replace religion as the belief system underlying and organizing society, gradually

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\(^7\) Observe that Durkheim, although generally seen as a conservative thinker, was not a reactionary. The society he wished to help construct was a new one, not a (mythical) older society which needed to be preserved or recovered. Durkheim saw the present as unstable and unreliable, an old world that had vanished while a new one had not yet taken solid form and was moving in negative and destructive directions. His rejection – a moral rejection – of the present is quite radical, and contrasts remarkably with that of his contemporary Simmel (1950), who viewed similar tendencies with a neutral, nonjudgmental gaze, as a challenge rather than as a problem.
becoming as “sacred” as, previously, religious beliefs. The latter were, according to Durkheim, veiled and misconceived understandings of the real, essential moral order:

“We must discover those moral forces that men, down to the present time, have conceived of only under the form of religious allegories. We must disengage them from their symbols, present them in their rational nakedness, so to speak, and find a way to make the child feel their reality without recourse to any mythological intermediary.” (Durkheim 1961 [2002]: 11).

Durkheim’s analogy of the secular moral order with the moral order propagated in religion would, in later stages of his career, push him towards profound engagements with religion as a social fact. For in both the secular and the religious moral order, he saw the same features at work: both were experienced and perceived as beyond the grasp and intention of individuals, and as compelling norms of social life. In the case of religion, they emanated from a divine force; in the case of social facts, society provided them; in both cases, individuals acquired them through extended interaction in their communities as well as through institutionalized forms of learning and education.

These features, then, formed the definition of his “social fact”. Social facts are forms of behavior and thought (1) that are “exterior to the individual” and (2) experienced by individuals as coercive, constraining and imperative rules, deviation of which would come at a price (see e.g. Durkheim 1895 [2010]: 100; discussion in Lukes 1973: 8-15). They are, in short, collective norms of which the individual has an acute awareness, and to which individuals feel they must submit. Here is one of the many formulations provided by Durkheim:

“A rule is not then a simple matter of habitual behavior; it is a way of acting that we do not feel free to alter according to taste. It is in some measure – and to the same extent that it is a rule – beyond personal preference. There is in it something that resists us, is beyond us”. (Durkheim 1961 [2002]: 28)

The religious analogies are plain: the social order is sacred in Durkheim’s eyes. Recall that the social fact, thus defined, was the object of sociology as designed by Durkheim; the two defining characteristics of social facts should set the new discipline apart from psychology (a
science devoted to *individual* behavior and thought).\(^8\) Durkheim soberly observed that people act differently when they are alone from when they are in the company of others. When alone, instincts, pre-social desires would regulate behavior (and would therefore be the terrain of psychological analysis); social behavior, by contrast, was regulated by “collective conscience” – what we could now call an “ideology” – and by a moral discipline pushing individuals to bring the extremes of their instincts under control so as to be acceptable in the eyes of others.\(^9\) In that sense, the development of social behavior marks a transition from “absolute existence” (humans in their natural state) to “relative existence” (humans as social, in relation to others and to institutions), from an a-moral state to a moral state, and from a mode of solitary autarky to one of solidarity and labor division (cf. Lukes 1973: 125; many of these notions were already elaborated in Durkheim’s dissertation, *De la Division du Travail social*, 1893 [1967]).

The collective conscience, note, is made up of “collective representations” – things we would now call “concepts”, relatively fixed meaning frames. And while institutions such as state-sponsored education transmit, across generations, certain collective representations “typical” of the nation-state, such representations are acquired alongside more specific ones characterizing and organizing life in particular social groups (caste, class, family, profession, etc.). The norms that organize social life are, in other words, layered and scaled. Socialization, thus, proceeded both at the level of becoming a citizen of a (homogeneous) country, and at the level of becoming a member of (more diverse) specific social sub-groups. The function of both is the same: norms always presuppose “a certain disposition in the individual for a regular existence – a preference for regularity” (Durkheim 1961: 34). Social rules are, simply put, “limits to our natural inclinations” (id: 96).

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\(^8\) While Durkheim spends considerable efforts distinguishing sociology from psychology, much of his work articulates an outspoken interest in processes of individual *internalization* of social facts.

\(^9\) This insistence on temperance and moderation, often presented as evidence of his politically conservative and bourgeois views, can also be seen as another feature of his analogy between secular and (Christian and Jewish) religious moral systems. Foucault (2015: 240) concludes his course on *The Punitive Society* with this caustic remark: “[Power] is hidden as power and passes for society. Society, Durkheim said, is the system of the disciplines, but what he did not say is that this system must be analyzed within strategies specific to a system of power.” Foucault saw the normative-disciplinary complex emerging in the 19th century as a core feature of the developing capitalist mode of production, and Durkheim’s work on the division of labor as a codification of this process, in which he “normalized” a system of power specific to and instrumental for this new mode of production.
Now, although Durkheim would underscore the fact that “man always lives in the midst of many groups”, his views on which specific groups we should think about differ from publication to publication, and even when he mentions groups, he does not necessarily devote much analysis to them. *Moral Education* specifies just three such groups: the family, the nation (or political group), and humanity (1961 [2002]: 73-74), for instance, and only the nation is elaborately discussed – not surprising in a book that aspired to reorganize national education in France. Elsewhere, he would profoundly examine professional groups and religious groups as well. In all, Durkheim had a strong preference for what we could call “thick” groups, groups in which people shared a lot of norms, values and “collective representations”, and as we shall see later, his influence has been pervasive in that respect.

### 2.2 Integration and anomie

Let us recall Durkheim’s motives for the development of a sociology. He was gravely concerned about the perceived loss of sociocultural cohesion in the France of his day. He believed he was witnessing the disintegration of an old social order, while a new one was not yet in place. Consequently, his sociology consistently addressed issues of sociocultural cohesion or integration: how did this rapidly changing society maintain a reasonable degree of cohesion? In *De la Division du Travail Social*, he pointed towards one answer: new forms of solidarity grounded in the emergence of new, smaller, professional groups were complementing older forms of solidarity grounded in “deep” sociocultural ties. And they did so by developing alternative moral orders and collective representations – the defining features of the “social” as we have seen earlier, and in that sense also the defining features of identifiable social groups. Members were integrated into such groups by subscribing to and adopting these defining features, by “enregistering” (we would now say) the moral codes that shaped such groups and held them together. In other words, integration is a factor of successful socialization of individuals into the moral orders of social groups, and social cohesion is an aggregate of such forms of integration.

One of the most interesting and productive concepts developed by Durkheim is that of *anomie*. Anomie describes a situation in which individuals reject available normative orders or cannot draw on them, either by absence of such orders, or because access to them is severely restricted. Anomie stands for “normlessness”. Durkheim discussed the concept elaborately in his *Suicide* (1897 [1951]), and he did so from the viewpoint of social cohesion. In a rapidly changing society where an old order is on its way out while a new order is under
construction, he argued, numbers of people find themselves in a moral no-man’s land where the rules of the social game are unknown, unclear or in need of development. Anomie, we could say, is the concrete face of social disintegration and individual marginalization. And Durkheim saw his own rapidly transforming society as prone to anomie, since the robustness and homogeneity of the old social order (revolving around, for instance, widely shared religious norms and close family ties) had vanished while a new one (based, as we saw, on a sophisticated division of labor generating numerous new professional, integrated groups) was not yet fully developed. Individuals, consequently, would risk being poorly or incompletely socialized and at a loss finding out what it takes to do well. This moral no man’s land explained the high statistical incidence of suicide, and Durkheim provided a primarily social explanation for suicide.

With some qualifications, Durkheim saw anomie as something negative, a lack of a clear and widely shared moral social order; individuals caught in anomie are marginalized, deviants, outsiders. At the same time, he saw anomie as an inevitable feature of socio-historical change and, in that sense, as a constant feature of societies at any point in time – a fully integrated society was an aspiration rather than a reality, and at any moment in its historical development, societies would be characterized by old and new normative systems coexisting in a sometimes uncomfortable way. Yet, Durkheim failed to see the creative and productive potential of anomie – the ways in which anomie spawns alternative ways of social organization. His view of anomie can also be made more useful when it is understood not as a top-down phenomenon – from the ‘center’ of society towards its margins – but as a general relational phenomenon operating at all levels of social life in the form of (negative) normative judgments of one about another. The margins of society, seen from this more broadly scoped view, are spaces where alternative social orders are quite rigorously observed and policed – as Howard Becker (1963) famously demonstrated.

2.3 Durkheim’s impact and the challenge of Rational Choice

I have deliberately been selective here, focusing on elements from Durkheim’s work that offer immediate possibilities for critical re-evaluation in view of sociolinguistic evidence. Let me summarize and reformulate these elements in a series of related propositions.

1. There is a set of human forms of behavior that are collective, in the sense that they cannot be reduced to individual agency or intention. They are acquired socially,
through socialization and education processes, in a variety of groups. They have a *sui generis* reality which cannot be explained by explaining individuals’ enactments.

2. These forms of behavior must be seen as governed by sets of sanctioned *norms*, or ideologies, and the character of these norms is *moral*. Social behavior is moral-normative.

3. These sets of norms characterize social groups, notably “thick” groups such as those of the nation, class, caste, family, profession, religion. We always live in a plurality of such groups.

4. These sets of norms are the key to *social cohesion* and *integration*: people who submit to them will be perceived as “normal” members of their social groups, while people deviating from them will be confronted by *anomie* and risk being seen as outcasts.

In a variety of formulations, these four propositions can be found throughout twentieth-century sociology (and beyond). Durkheim’s sociology was, like that of e.g. Dewey and Bourdieu but unlike that of e.g. Weber (Gerth & Mills 1970: 57) first and foremost a sociology of *communities* and of *social cohesion*, and it opened several areas of exploration that became foundational for twentieth-century social sciences. These areas ranged from the study of ethnoclassification and ethnoscience (through his work with Marcel Mauss), collective memory (through his student Maurice Halbwachs), labor organization and labor institutions (influencing, to name just a few, Everett C. Hughes, Herbert Blumer and John Kenneth Galbraith), socialization (influencing e.g. Jean Piaget), religion, cultural symbols and ritual (influencing e.g. Victor Turner and Erving Goffman), and several others.

It was Talcott Parsons who turned the priorities of Durkheim’s program into the systematic theory to which Glyn Williams took exception, in the effort significantly simplifying some of the most interesting but often unstable aspects of Durkheim’s work – notably the relationship between “society” and “social groups” and the place of individual agency in society.10

Parson’s sociology, as we know, focused on *integration* at the level of “society” (e.g. Parsons

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10 Parsons (1937) is the most influential reformulation of Durkheim’s sociology. But Parsons was not alone in seeking completion of the Durkheimian project. To name one already mentioned, it is hard not to see Foucault’s sustained effort to describe and delineate the emergence of the modern “normal” individual through forms of discipline as an idiosyncratic engagement with some of Durkheim’s unfinished business. See e.g. Foucault (2003, 2015). Likewise, one can profitably read e.g. Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984) as an elaborate engagement with Durkheim’s notions of social cohesion and anomie.
Societies would remain integrated because of the widespread acceptance of specific and relatively enduring sets of values, while norms characterized smaller social groups. Norms could differ from the dominant values, of course, they could even run counter to these values; but they were distinctly “lighter” than values. Thus, in a text written in 1964 on US youth culture (at that time perceived as rebellious and increasingly deviant), Parsons confidently concluded that

“American society in a sense appears to be running its course. We find no cogent evidence of a major change in the essential patterns of its governing values.” (Parsons 1964: 181)

In other words, the long-haired, pot-smoking and anti-Vietnam young rebels of the early 1960s were still good and decent Americans, and their shocking behavior did not shake the foundations of the American mode of integration. Four years later, such an argument would prove to be hard to sustain, and not just in the US (Elbaum 2002).

As I said above, Durkheim was very much a sociologist of communities, of the collective dimension of social life. The most radical challenge to this came from what is now known as Rational Choice (Theory) (Green & Shapiro 1994; Adamae 2003). Rational Choice is an outgrowth of Methodological Individualism, something Max Weber introduced as a doctrine in the social sciences (and was taken further by e.g. Hayek and Popper). Simply put, Methodological Individualism is the theory complex in which every human activity is in fine reduced to individual interests, intentions, motives, concerns and decisions, because (it is argued) such observable individual levels of subjectivity in action, even if eminently social, are the only ones available to the analyst (Heath 2015). And Rational Choice can best be seen as a radicalization of the “individualism” in this: human action, in Rational Choice, is driven by one motive: the maximization of individual “profit” (material as well as symbolic) and proceeds by means of calculated, intentional and rational decisions by individuals (“choice”).

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11 Much of the pioneering literature on “late” or “Post”-Modernity implicitly takes this Durkheimian-Parsonian integrated society as its benchmark. Thus, for example, Zygmunt Bauman’s “liquid modernity” evidently takes a “solid modernity” as its point of departure (Bauman 2007). Whether such a solid modernity was ever a reality rather than a projection of a specific sociological imagination remains an untestable research question, although works such as E.P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class (1968) strongly suggest that the degree of integration of our societies in an earlier stage of their development may have been grossly overrated.

12 Needless to say, Parsons’ view of US society as integrated was fundamentally challenged, and some will say shattered, by Gunnar Myrdal’s monumental American Dilemma (1944).
Since Durkheim’s moral order crucially depended on the suppression (or “moderation”) of individual interests and preferences – egoism is typically seen as “immoral” – the theoretical dichotomy could not be sharper.\textsuperscript{13}

Rational choice, in that sense, is a fundamental denial of Durkheim’s “social fact”. Even more: it is a lock-stock-and-barrel denial of the entire Durkheimian sociological imagination, for “there is no such thing as society” (to quote Margaret Thatcher’s slogan). In Kenneth Arrow’s (1951) famous view, any form of collective (rational) choice is just impossible. Arrow, “proved” this in his so-called “Impossibility Theorem”, quite incredibly by means of intricate mathematical argument – and mathematics reshaped (and replaced) field observation-based sociology as the privileged source of knowledge on humans and their social practices (Adamae 2003: 102-116; cf. Blommaert 2016). To the disbelief of empirical sociologists such as Everett C. Hughes, if certain social practices were ruled mathematically “impossible”, it was assumed that their occurrence in the real world was exceptional or accidental (cf. Hughes 1971 [2009]: xix, 348-354).

Rational Choice never made a real inroad into Sociolinguistics; but it largely dominates several social-scientific and humanities disciplines, most notably Economics (cf. Thaler 2015).\textsuperscript{14} Revisiting and revising Durkheim’s social fact from the perspective of contemporary sociolinguistics – the exercise I stall embark on in a moment – therefore implies a rejection of Rational Choice. A good reason for this is that in the more radical varieties of Rational Choice, people never seem to communicate, or to communicate only in dyadic logical dialogue when they are allowed to.

\textsuperscript{13} Judging from Durkheim’s (1897 [1951]) discussion of “egoistic suicide”, anomie is, in effect, a killer.
\textsuperscript{14} The few attempts to use Rational Choice in sociolinguistic work were rather epic failures in social analysis. Carol-Myers-Scotton’s Social Motivations for Codeswitching (1993) used an awkward conception of Rights-and-Obligations sets attached to “codes”, from which speakers would rationally choose the most advantageous one; the actual social settings in which code-switching occurs was dismissed as accidental, not fundamental (see Meeuwis & Blommaert 1994 for an elaborate critique); in David Laitin’s Language Repertoires and State Construction in Africa (1992), an equally awkward variety of Game Theory is used to arrive at an ideal, rational “3+1 language outcome” for language policy in Africa. The argument is entirely detached from anything that ties languages to real social environments.
3. Sociolinguistics and the social fact: Avec Durkheim

So let us first establish this: people do communicate; they communicate all the time, in highly diverse and complex modes, often with more than one interlocutor, and not always logically, economically or rationally; it is through interaction that they are recognized as “social”, as a “subject”, and as producers of ideas. Affirming this is, of course, of an extraordinary triviality. But this trivium has been denied and neglected in tons of sociological and other social-scientific work, turning it not in a trivial truism but into a hard-fought methodological principle. Establishing that principle means affirming the very possibility of a socio-linguistics. And I think we have pretty decent empirical back-up for this principle and, thence, for the possibility of sociolinguistics. So let us show some of that evidence in what follows.

I repeat what I mentioned earlier: while almost every major sociologist would emphasize (or at least mention) interaction as a given, detailed attention to interaction has never really been part of the sociological mainstream. Interaction was paid lip service to, and communication is often seen as a set of rudimentary transmission practices not worthy of study in its own right – something so elementary that it belongs to the décor in which real social action is played out and does not demand further examination. Blumer, defining the methodological position of symbolic interactionism as it was being kept in the margins of the sociology of his time, lamented (1969: 7):

“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, social interaction is usually taken for granted and treated as having little, if any, significance in its own right.”

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15 The assumption seems to be: since we all do it, there is no need to study it. Hence Hymes’ critical views of the communication-focused work of Bourdieu and Habermas – two exceptions to the rule just sketched here (Hymes 1996: 52-56). My own verdict on Bourdieu is significantly more merciful (Blommaert 2015a). As for Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action, (Habermas 1984), I share Hymes’ critique. Hymes points to the abstract and normative-idealized treatment of communication patterns in the work of both, detecting a lack of sensitivity to the actual ways in which language functions in real social environments. Habermas can be said, at most, to specify a set of ideal normative preconditions for communication.
Durkheim was no exception. And this, remarkably, led to generations of sociologists overlooking what is potentially the most self-evident “social fact”. Let me sketch some aspects of it, and start with the most general one.

3.1 Language as a normative collective system: ordered indexicality

People can only communicate with others when they share and deploy different forms of “grammar” – conventionalized normative patterns ordering the potential mess of symbols we call language, ensuring that we “make sense” to each other. This simple observation should be sufficient to establish it as a Durkheimian social fact pur sang.16 But let me elaborate this – begging the reader for tolerance for the highly sketchy summary of complex histories of linguistic thought in what follows.

The different forms of grammar can – roughly – be divided into grammars of form and grammars of usage, and usually the term “grammar” is reserved for the former: the fact that the formal, morphosyntactic organization of linguistic expressions is governed by language-specific (i.e. non-individual) rules, compliance with which displays some degree of flexibility but is overall quite strict and relatively stable and enduring. Description of these formal rules became “linguistics”, and their relatively stable and enduring character became the key element in identifying separate “languages” (cf. Silverstein 1977; Irvine 2001; Bauman & Briggs 2003; Blommaert 2013; see Agha 2007a:222 for a concise discussion). As for grammars of usage, they gradually became a separate domain of study (called “Pragmatics”) through the work of language philosophers such as Austin (1962), Grice (1975) and Searle (1969) (cf. Verschueren 1999). Here, too, relatively stable and enduring rules were detected, although the overlap between such rules and separate “languages” was less outspoken. Rules of politeness, for instance, appeared to be connected, rather, to social and cultural groups than to the actual “languages” they use, and were even seen as potentially universal (Brown & Levinson 1987; for a critical appraisal see Eelen 2001). A generation of anthropologists had, in the meantime, provided mountains of literature on the sociocultural embedding of language in specific (often “ethnic” or “tribal”) communities (see Hymes 1964 for a survey),

16 Saussure, who attended lectures by Durkheim, already pointed to “a grammatical system that exists virtually in every brain, or more precisely in the brains of a community of individuals; because language is never complete in any individual, it exists in its perfect state only in the masses” (1960:30; French original, my translation). Observe here how Saussure adopts Durkheim’s concept of “social fact” and, as we shall see, deviates strongly in this from the methodological individualism characterizing many subsequent developments in linguistics.
while symbolic-interactionist sociologists in the US had started exploring the social-scientific significance of everyday patterns of social interaction in their own social environments (e.g. Goffman 1959; Garfinkel 1967; Blumer 1969).

The eminently social fact of grammar, remarkably, became individualized as soon as universals became the ambition of linguistic theory in the wake of Noam Chomsky’s epochal reformulation of linguistic as a science of “competence” – the mentally structured capacity to generate grammatically well-formed sentences (e.g. Chomsky 1965). Chomsky announced that the focus on competence meant that linguists should be concerned with an “ideal” speaker/hearer operating outside of any form of real communicative situation; and this ideal speaker became an individual speaker whose “language” existed, in universal ways and (contrary to Saussure’s view) perfectly, in his/her individual brain (see Katz 1972 for an excellent example and Cicourel 1973, chapters 3, 4, for a critique). Methodological individualism, thus, entered the science of language through the detour of psychologism, and social and cultural norms were replaced by mental operations unaffected by (socially and culturally contextualized) “performance”. Language had become an a-social fact.

Modern sociolinguistics was a reaction to that; and from its very beginnings, work in sociolinguistics would struggle to re-emphasize language as a social fact. Reaching back to the oeuvres of Sapir and Whorf, the abstract language designated as the object of linguistics was countered by situated, contextualized “speech” and such speech had to be understood in terms of a dialectics of language and social life, lodged in a “speech community” (Hymes 1966; 1972; 1980; Gumperz 1968; 1982). And apart from a (possibly) mentally hardwired and universal grammatical “competence” – the linguistic system – one should also consider the group-specific and culturally-relative communicative competence – the sociolinguistic system (Hymes 1992). Communicative competence, note, referred to knowledge of the sociocultural norms of language and the capacity to deploy them adequately in a variety of social circumstances. The norms of language, thus, were defined as sociocultural constructs in a theoretical frame emphasizing action; and Michael Silverstein (again drawing on Whorf) put a gloss on them: “language ideologies” (Silverstein 1979).

I shall be forgiven for this breathless rush through half a century of intellectually development, for I have arrived now where I wanted to arrive. The concept of language ideologies, which rose to prominence and became a unifying focus in the 1990s (Kroskrity, Schieffelin & Woolard 1992; see Blommaert 2006a for a review), offered a comprehensive
framework for re-establishing language as a social fact, in nearly all aspects. The central idea proved extraordinarily productive: language is used on the basis of socioculturally grounded conventions dialogically organizing its production and understanding; the empirical basis for such ideologies were concrete “indexicals”, i.e. aspects of communicative action that pointed in nonrandom ways to salient, context-specific sociocultural meaning reservoirs, and ultimately to social structure (see Agha 2007b; also De Fina et al 2006; Cicourel 1973 is a precursor). Indexicals, thus, pointed to conventionalized and therefore presupposed histories of meaningful usage (or “models”, Gal 2016: 119) and precipitated them into new moments of deployment with active, responsive interlocutors. In Silverstein’s words (1992: 315):

“Now any indexical process, wherein signs point to a presupposed context in which they occur (i.e. have occurred) or to an entailed potential context in which they occur (i.e. will have occurred), depends on some metapragmatic function to achieve a measure of determinacy. It turns out that the crucial position of ideologies of semiosis is in constituting such a mediating metapragmatics, giving parties an idea of determinate contextualization for indexicals, presupposable as shared according to interested positions or perspectives to follow upon some social fact like group membership, condition in society, achieved commonality of interests, etc. Ideology construes indexicality. In so doing ideology inevitably biases its metapragmatic “take” so as to create another potential order of effective indexicality that bears what we can appreciate sometimes as a truly ironic relation to the first.”

This principle could be applied to the formal “grammar” of language, which appeared subject to strong language-ideological effects (e.g. Silverstein 1979; Errington 1988; Irvine & Gal 2000); to the learning of language norms in socialization processes (e.g. Schieffelin & Ochs 1986); to the use of specific “registers” governing concrete sociocultural domains of speech and subject to processes of “enregisterment” (e.g. Agha 2005; 2007b); to patterns of everyday narratives (De Fina et al 2006); to lay and institutionalized concepts of language, including sociolinguistic hierarchies and attributed speaker identities (e.g. Silverstein 1996, 1998; Agha 2003) and the politics of language at nation-state level and in more specific institutional contexts (e.g. Jaffe 1999; Blommaert 1999; Philips 2000; Haviland 2003); on intertextual processes of meaning-making and resemiotization (e.g. Silverstein & Urban 1996); on complex contemporary forms of meaning-and-identity making involving “codeswitching” (e.g. Rampton 1995; 2006). En route, a large number of crucial concepts in the study of language were redefined: language itself, speech community, genre, style (Gal 2016). And so
forth: the range of themes, concepts and domains that were profoundly reshaped by the conceptual development of language ideologies is extensive.

The truly fundamental theoretical and methodological impact of language ideologies, in view of the exercise I undertake here, is that it has given us an extraordinarily precise view of “norms” (and their cognates “values” and “collective representations”). Norms, we now see, are language-ideological phenomena produced and enacted in communicative action. They are, more precisely, ordered indexicalities: sets of indexicals organized in relation to each other, with some of them being “emblematic” of the meaning effects they generate – a sort of register “shibboleth” effect, as when someone starts a sentence with “oh dear” versus “fuck” (cf. Silverstein 2003; Agha 2005, 2007; Blommaert 2005), or shifts into a mock accent so as to project an evaluated identity on someone else (e.g. Hill 2001; Rampton 2006). The fundamentally normative and interpreted character of social relations, thus, becomes clear: whenever we interact with others, we produce not just the kinds of denotational meanings one finds in a dictionary, but we produce evaluative meanings, in which the words, actions and identities of all the participants are fixed and given (sociocultural) value. And in so doing we produce, moment by moment, “culture” and “society”, as well as “identity” and “meaning”. None of these concepts can be detached from interaction – “language and culture”, for instance, have merged into the interactional production of indexical order (Silverstein 2004).

Echoes of Bakhtin and Goffman are evident here: language-ideologies can in many ways be seen as an extreme methodological refinement of the general ideas articulated by Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Goffman (1971, 1974). Bakhtin’s sociohistorical theory of literary form has now been extended into the entire field of language in society, and given far more analytical purchase and precision; while the micro-orders of social conduct described by Goffman can now also be reformulated in a more systematic and generalizable way. I shall come back to the continued relevance of both authors further on; in the case of Goffman, we shall see that, in a wider sense, the program of symbolic interactionism (and to some extent, of ethnomethodology) is coming back with a vengeance (cf. Blumer 1969; Cicourel 1973; Garfinkel 2002). In addition, and combining Bakhtin with Goffman, ordered indexicalities presuppose, and necessitate, a dialogical conception of meaning-making that stretches over the entire range of behaviors deployed in what we call “interaction” or “communication”. Whenever we communicate, we keep an eye on the other and adjust our communicative behavior to an anticipated uptake from our interlocutors. In contrast to what Rational Choice suggest, we are quite altruistic and cooperative in communication, and we are happy and
eager to accommodate the other in our own language use – as shown whenever we revert to a kind of pidgin English when an obviously confused tourist from far away ask us for directions. Our communicative behavior is regulated by the fact that it is organized together with others.¹⁷

Three final remarks are in order.

(1) Orders of indexicality are obviously collective, social phenomena. I qualified them as “nonrandom” on a couple of occasions already, and this is vital because any form of understanding requires recognizability in terms of a specific set of ordered indexicals. An interaction opened with “Excuse me, sir” versus one opened with “hey, you!” is likely to be a different interaction (probably a difference captured by “polite” versus “impolite”), and recognition of this difference can only occur when the participants share the language-ideological valuations of these indexicals. And they do. A recent study by Silverstein (2015) on public (online) discussions of “New York accent” showed remarkable similarities in several categories of valuations articulated by participants, something that corroborates Penny Eckert’s (2008; 2012) notion of “indexical fields”. Linguistic variation, it now appears, is subject to powerful collective language-ideological forces (“we have come to see variation as a more robust and dynamic indexical system”, Eckert 2015: 43; also Rampton 2006, 2016a). Section 3.2 will return to this.

(2) People display an outspoken tendency to create norms whenever they are absent or unclearly scripted, and new communication technologies provide us with plenty of examples of that. The extremely rapid development of new social media platforms and apps, one can say, presents their users with a situation of “anomie” each time they engage with such novelties. And whereas common wisdom would often qualify mobile phone texting codes and Facebook interactions as “anything goes” because the carefully indoctrinated school standards of language and script appear to be violated continuously, a more concentrated analysis shows that even such apparently open, highly diverse, free and unscripted communicative spaces are very rapidly filled with ad-hoc (and rapidly solidified) norms, defining modes of interaction, genres and

¹⁷ I cannot enter into detail here, but the well-known Gricean Maxims (Grice 1975) assume cooperativity in communication as a given – in general, we want to understand and be understood whenever we communicate – and there is an entire tradition of “Accommodation Theory” in which speech convergence between interlocutors is studied (Giles, Coupland & Coupland 1991). Cooperation is also the central assumption to most of Conversation Analysis (e.g. Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977).
styles, and subject to sometimes rigorous policing; these new norms can and do function as tools for evading or subverting imposed, top-down rules when existing rules are experienced as oppressive (e.g. Varis & Wang 2011; Wang, Juffermans & Du 2012; Blommaert 2012; Leppänen & Elo 2016; Du 2016; Staehr 2017). As said before, anomie may be defined as a space without norms; at the same time, it is also a space where new norms are invited, demanded and manufactured – a creative space in which “the social”, as grounded in the sharedness of sets of norms, is instantly shaped. To rephrase this with reference to Rational Choice: we see in this phenomenon of instant, grassroots norm-creation how people continuously surrender their individual choice and freedom to joint patterns of regulation and policing. Because they do not want to get stuck talking to just themselves, one can imagine.

(3) While ordered indexicals organize and generate “meaning”, such meanings are not just “rational”, i.e. denotational, but also, and simultaneously, aesthetic and dramatic. In fact, when people communicate, they perform a bundle of functions: epistemic, affective, poetic, performative (Hymes 1980; Haviland 1989; Bauman & Briggs 1990). And it is this bundle – not just its epistemic aspect – that turns communication into something that satisfies higher-order social and cultural demands (Hymes 1966, 1996; Silverstein 1985, 1997, 2004; Blommaert 2006b, 2015c). We convince others not just by the pureness and truth-conditional excellence of our argument, but even more by the stylistic-narrative performance in which it is cast and by the evaluative key in which we frame it; and we pay meticulous attention to all of this while we build our argument. In the view of Charles Goodwin (2007), there is something inherently moral in epistemic practices, since the latter demand a tightly organized set of moves within a chosen participant framework, rupture of which is seen as a moral as well as an epistemic issue (cf. also Goodwin 1994). This simple observation blows out of the water any theory in which human communication is reduced to the rational exchange of pure (and perfectly retrievable) meanings. To put it somewhat crudely and in folksy terms: human rationality is very much tied up with, in practice even indistinguishable from, human irrationality – with emotion, morality and aesthetics.
We are very subjective when we believe we are objective and can get quite emotional when we discuss “the facts”.\(^\text{18}\)

I have spent a lot of space discussing this first element – language as a normative collective system, now understood through the conceptual instruments of language ideologies – for it underlies several of the points that follow. I can treat these points somewhat more concisely now.

### 3.2 Language variation: dialects, accents and languaging

I already mentioned above (\textit{pace} Eckert) that language variation is now seen as an indexical system of “distinction”. Language is the great diversifier: even the smallest feature can serve as an emblem of fundamental identity difference (Rampton 1995; Blommaert 2015b). But let us start where we have to start: with the features that index such distinction, language variation itself.

Recall the elements that Durkheim identified as defining the social fact: social facts were (a) phenomena that transcended the control of the individual and (b) had a compelling, normative effect on individuals. Now consider a straightforward case: all over the world, people learn a language we call English; they do so, in formal education, on the basis of a corpus of teaching materials that are amazingly similar (in fact, they can be seen as standardized industrial mass products). Yet all over the world, and in spite of the near-uniform input, people speak English \textit{with an accent}. These accents are clearly identifiable: few would not be able to tell the difference between, say, an “American” accent and a “French” one, and many would be able to distinguish an “Indian” accent from a “Nigerian” one. In fact, such distinctions have led to the development of a branch of Applied Linguistics called “World Englishes” (e.g. Bhatt 2001; also Pennycook 2007; Seargeant 2009; Mufwene 2010), where different regional realizations of English are no longer seen as deviations from “standard” English but as \textit{bona fide} language varieties in their own right, often with names such as “Hinglish” (Hindi-English: Kothari & Snell 2011) or more generically “country name + English”, as in “Brunei English”. The range of “typical” features, for instance in Brunei

\(^\text{18}\) Knowledge practices in science are no exception, and there is a large methodological literature criticizing the claims to objectivity made in various branches of science. Aaron Cicourel’s \textit{Method and Measurement in Sociology} (1964) famously confronted mainstream statistical research with the problems of inevitable subjectivity in interaction. His critique had a profound effect on Bourdieu’s methodology as well, and for Bourdieu, the only possible road to objectivity was the recognition of subjectivity in knowledge construction (Blommaert 2015a; for a cognate argument see Fabian 1983).
English, is extensive and ranges from phonetics and morphosyntax to discursive and lexical differences. The explanations for such differences are usually sought in influences from language contact with “native” language substrates, the specific history of English in the region, the local or region language policies and the education system (Deterding & Sharbawi 2013). In the case of Hinglish, apart from these factors, the influence and prestige of a powerful Hindi-language popular culture is also noted (Kothari 2011). (Observe that we are addressing a globalization phenomenon here, and I shall return to this in later parts of this text).

The fact, however, remains the same. People growing up and living in specific regions of the world acquire features of speech that are distinctly, and identifiably, regional – “from there”. These features – accents – are extraordinarily powerful identity shibboleths; in fact the word “shibboleth” itself refers to a biblical story in which accent in speech was used to distinguished allies from enemies (and to kill the latter, appropriately identified). And getting rid of an acquired accent is quite a slow, difficult and sometimes painful job, for which, in the meantime, a branch of specialized therapists and providers has emerged (cf. Blommaert 2008a; Silverstein 2015). Variation in speech, we can see, is not something one typically chooses – it is acquired through socialization processes, i.e. through a shared history in a community in which the fine distinctions of speech are learned and embodied. Those are phenomena that transcend the individual, no one really owns them.

As for their compelling, normative effects, we must keep earlier remarks in mind and now turn to a venerable branch of sociolinguistics: social dialectology in the tradition of Peter Trudgill.19 Drawing on Britain & Cheshire (eds. 2003), several points are worth noting.

- Collective identity appears to be the main driver guiding the dynamics of dialect.
  More specifically, dialect, however defined, is a shibboleth for regional identity, i.e. a recognizable identity shared by people inhabiting a particular region, currently or in the past; dialect indexes the local and regional (also Johnstone 2010; Silverstein 2015).

19 Note that “dialect” in the traditional sense is a notion that has come under fire from language-ideologically inspired linguistic anthropology. Gal (2016: 117) observes that varieties defined on the basis of situation of use – “registers” – are hard to distinguish from those associated to spatial identity – “dialects” and “sociolects”; Silverstein (2016) adds to this a historical reanalysis showing how traditional dialect research can, and should, be reformulated as concerned with enregisterment. This idea was of course a central assumption in Agha (2007b) as well.
- This also pertains to innovation and change: they depend strongly on *degrees of social integration*. The better people are integrated in the community, the more they will contribute to innovation in dialect, due to the tendency to index specific subgroups within that community. Social isolation – as with e.g. spatially isolated “outliers” in poorly populated areas – slows down the patterns of change in dialects (Britain 2003).
- “Dialect leveling” – a well-known feature in dialectology, in which dialects appear to develop in a more convergent way, depends on social factors as well: *speech accommodation* between speakers of different dialect backgrounds (Kerswill 2003).
- The tendency to index specific subgroups through dialect innovation highlights (a) the heterogeneity of dialect “speech communities”; and (b) the importance of “loose social networks” (Watts 2003; also Silverstein 2016) in language change.
- Throughout all of this, “social categories are (...) seen as ideologically-driven processes” (Britain & Cheshire 2003: 4): the dynamics of dialect change is governed by language-ideological attributions – the normative and identity-projecting phenomena discussed in the previous section (also Rampton 2009; Gal 2016).

The latter can be observed in yet another dimension of language change: *languaging*, the extraordinarily creative mixing and blending of linguistic and expressive resources typical of sociolinguistically highly complex environments (Jörgensen 2008; Creese & Blackledge 2010; Jörgensen et al 2011; Juffermans 2015; Madsen et al 2016; Blommaert & Rampton 2016). While languaging, at first sight, appears like unregulated bricolage or mashup business, a kind of communicative anomie (and is often so perceived by those in charge of guarding the gates of language correctness), a closer look reveals a tremendous level of structuring, all of it governed language-ideologically by delicate shifts in (identity) “footing”, alignment between speakers and changes in the participant framework. Needless to say that current social media usage displays a phenomenal amount of such forms of languaging in new forms of graphic practice (e.g. Tagliamonte 2015; Du 2016).

The bricolage can, in effect, reveal differences between locally constructed and discernible “varieties” (Kailoglou 2015; Madsen 2017; also Rampton 2011), and can be a powerful instrument for “styling” specific identities – ironically, ritually, playfully, or quite seriously (Rampton 1995; Coupland 2007, 2015; Cutler 2009). The more serious forms of styling may revolve around highly ritualized minimal displays of a “heritage language”, with tremendous identity-establishing effects (e.g. Moore 2017). And “quite seriously” can also mean “making money”, of course: the commodification of language variation in new economic sectors –
think of tourism, marketing and call centers as examples – has turned sociolinguistics into the profitable exchange of more than just symbolic capital (Heller 2010; Jaworski & Thurlow 2010; Blommaert 2010; Kelly-Holmes 2010; Woydack 2017).

3.3 Inequality, voice, repertoire

In discussing languaging, I already pointed to the linguistic and expressive resources that people use in such complex forms of discursive work. Such resources are, of course, not evenly distributed in any society, and the reasons for this are social.20 Hymes (1996: 26-27) stated this problem clearly: while language obviously offers a pool of opportunities to people, it simultaneously acts as a constraint; it is a human social treasure trove as well as a human social problem, since no single person knows all of a language and meeting the limits of what we can communicate is an acutely frustrating social experience for all of us. Throughout life, we continuously acquire new sets of resources while we shed older, obsolete ones; and in its most general sense, we are always constrained by what is communicable and what is not – we often have no words for what needs to be expressed.21 But let me focus on two specific elements by way of illustration: (1) access to specific register and genre resources and (2) access to specific contexts for communication.

(1) In general, and contrary to the suggestion of the “ideal” (or “native”) speaker/hearer, no real human being has access to all the resources that circulate socially, for several reasons. There can be institutional barriers reserving “elite” resources for a small group of people, creating effective hierarchical patterns of access to what Bourdieu (1982) called “legitimate language” – and access to “standard” English in large parts of the world is a case in point (Park & Wee 2012; Blommaert 2010, 2014). People have easy access to spoken vernacular varieties of English widespread in global popular culture and open to informal learning – which is why words such as “fuck” and “shit” occur almost everywhere – while literacy-based standard varieties are far more difficult (and expensive) to obtain, and specialized registers such as legal-bureaucratic, literary or academic varieties even more so, since they demand access to

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20 Without too much comment I can observe that this view obviously clashes with the notion of the “ideal speaker/hearer” that became the hallmark of Chomskyan linguistics, see above. What follows can be read as a simple empirical refutation of this notion.

21 Foucault (1969) coined the term “archive” to identify the limits of what can be conventionally thought and understandably communicated: if we communicate within the archive, we are “normal” and others will understand us; if we communicate outside the boundaries of the archive, chances are that others will qualify us as lunatics. See Blommaert (2005: 99-103) for a discussion.
effectively policed formal learning channels and “members only” communities of users. Thus, illiterate people are likely never to produce written discourse, and not because of choice but because of social-institutional structural reasons. And there are many “misunderstandings” that are grounded not in an individual’s poor choices of words but in an asymmetrical degree of communicative competence between speakers (Gumperz 1982 is a classic; also Roberts 2016). Processes of access restriction are not necessarily “institutional” though: similar forms of gatekeeping occur almost everywhere. Howard Becker’s (1963) Outsiders described how “marginal” social groups such as marihuana smoking jazz musicians also deploy tactics of selection and exclusion through specific modes of talk distinguishing “those in the know” from newcomers or ignorant “outsiders”. A lot of the literature on styling and languaging reviewed earlier addresses exactly such small peer-group identity dynamics in which group-specific, exclusive, enregistered phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and genre features are made emblematic of membership and eligibility (cf. Silverstein 2006; Blackledge & Creese 2016).

(2) As to restrictions of access to specific contexts, again, nobody has access to all available contexts that make up the communicative economies of societies. This is again clearest in institutional contexts, where, for instance, defendants and witnesses in courts have no access to the context of verdict-making, which is exclusively reserved for the judges. More generally, expert contexts are often decisive in social life, while they are tightly controlled on a “members only” basis by the experts themselves (e.g. Cicourel 1967; Briggs 1997, 2005; Mehan 1996). We often have no impact on what others do with our words in patterns of re-entextualization we call “text trajectories”, in which a subject’s statement is recorded by someone, summarized in a report by someone else for yet someone else, who takes a decision which is then moved down the trajectory and fed back to the subject – as in bureaucratic procedures or newspaper interviews (e.g. Blommaert 2001). Obviously, access to such restricted contexts is already conditioned by (1) above: one needs specific forms of language and literacy proficiency in order to enter such social spaces. And in a world in which large chunks of communication demand access to hi-tech ICT equipment and infrastructures, such inequalities display no tendencies to disappear (Wang et al 2014).
Both forms of inequality would operate across the specter of the sociolinguistic system, but of course, some would be subject to more outspoken and structural forms of exclusion and marginalization than others. Hymes himself focused on the predicament of Native American groups, and speakers of small, minority or immigrant languages are, evidently, in structurally weaker positions than speakers of majority and prestigious varieties – recent sociolinguistics has provided an avalanche of work on these themes (for an elaborate case study, see the essays in Blommaert et al 2012). Thus, sociolinguistic inequalities characterize every social system, and the causes for such inequalities are social. Hymes (1996) coined the term “voice” for the actual capacity for people to make themselves understood and noted that problems of voice represent the critical dimension of sociolinguistic work: rather than merely describing sociolinguistic diversity as a kind of juxtaposition of equally valuable varieties, we should engage with the question as to why particular varieties are, in actual fact, not equal to others – questions of voice as a sociopolitical given, voice as the reflection of social structures in the actual communicative abilities of people (cf. Blommaert 2005, 2008b; Van der Aa 2012; Scott 2013).

The latter move involves and presupposes attention to repertoires: the actual resources people have acquired and can effectively deploy in communication. The notion of repertoire has only recently been made into a topic of profound reflection, often from an awareness that widespread qualifications such as “speaker of language X”, or even “(non)native speaker of language X” are entirely inadequate as descriptors of the tremendous diversity in degrees of proficiency and communicative ability people display (e.g. Blommaert & Backus 2013; Rymes 2014; Busch 2015). Repertoires are by definition uniquely individual and can be described as “indexical biographies” reflecting the social experiences of people to specific orders of indexicality – exposure, immersion, learning, informal acquisition – and the ways in which such experiences reflect the social order and inscribe individuals into a wide variety of group memberships. What is in people’s repertoires is usually there for a good reason: because they needed it at some point in social life; in that sense, repertoires are traces of social norms, or if you wish, traces of the compelling and often even coercive and consequential evaluative responses of others in our lives – traces of power, in short. Taking that to the theoretical level: repertoires once more show how becoming and being a unique individual is a fundamentally social process: socialized, dialogical, normative, dynamic.

Facts of sociolinguistic distribution, we can see, shape a field of power and are reproduced by it, and turn language, in its various manifestations, into a heavily policed object in which
potentially every difference can be turned into a consequential form of inequality. The term “voice”, as used here, points towards this consequentiality: the normative organization of language – notably the tendency to “standardize” forms of language and language usage into highly politically sensitive templates – affects the life chances of people, and sociolinguistics has brought a wealth of evidence to this point. Specifically through the lens of sociolinguistic analysis, we can observe in great detail the way in which an infinitely fractal system of normativity – indexicals and their forms of order – turns into a capillary power structure in Foucault’s (2015) sense, with on the one end elaborate formal and institutional systems of “language testing” (e.g. Extra, Spotti & Van Avermaet 2011; Spotti 2016), and on the other the minute-by-minute evaluative judgments of people’s communicative actions by their interlocutors in everyday life.

3.4 Language, the social fact

If Durkheim would have looked more closely at language and how it operates in and through society, he would have had considerably less trouble establishing his fait social. Half a century of sociolinguistics has proven, at great length and in infinite detail, that language can only be explained as a social fact – other explanations are absurd. Particularly absurd, we can conclude quite confidently, is Rational Choice. Almost everything that has been brought up by sociolinguists flatly contradicts the central assumptions of Rational Choice and offers mountains of hard and conclusive empirical evidence for this contradiction. The worldview of Rational Choice, from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, is that of a world populated by people who only talk to themselves.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of sociolinguistics, and its most important contribution to sociological theory, is the highly detailed and precise view of normativity I discussed in 3.1. The “norms”, “values” and “collective representations” that characterize the Durkheimian (and Parsonian) assumptions about integration and social coherence are given a feet-on-the-ground realism as continuously evolving, dialogically constructed social actions in which “meaning”, in the traditional linguistic sense, is entirely blended with sociocultural

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22 Many of these forms of language testing could doubtless be categorized as forms of “power without knowledge”, to use David Graeber’s terms, “where coercion and paperwork largely substituted for the need for understanding (...) subjects” (2015: 65). The benchmarks of such testing modes are usually fictitious “standard” forms of language, imagined levels of competence, and ludicrous projections of degrees of fluency onto broader sociopolitical levels of citizenship. This form of science fiction, nonetheless, has become increasingly prominent as an instrument of power and exclusion in the field of migration, almost everywhere.
evaluations of a moral nature, precipitating what we call “identity”. Identity is not a product, nor an a priori, but the material of interaction itself and, so, the material of social order. Since this material is extremely diverse, the social order is too, and the robust confidence with which, for instance, Parsons (2007) spoke about the “American core values” appears entirely unjustified from the viewpoint of sociolinguistic evidence – the price of analytical precision is ontological diversification (Parkin 2016).

Remember that one of the central arguments in favor of methodological individualism was that in human action, only individual subjectivity was observable. On the basis of what we have seen so far, this argument, too, has been dealt a death blow. Sociolinguistics’ contribution to a theory of social action is intersubjectivity: the fact that people, when communicating, require a dialogically established normative template shared with others in order to arrive at “meaning”; the latter is an interpretive effect, constantly negotiated and accommodated intersubjectively (and not necessarily by means of “purely” rational means). To the extent that social action is communicative action, it is joint action (cf. Blumer 1969; Cicourel 1973).

In the next section, I shall add to what has been established so far. There were things that Durkheim and his successors in the Grand Tradition of sociology couldn’t possibly have known. They nuance some of the assumptions underlying classical sociology and they open exciting alternative trajectories of sociological re-imagination. Needless to say that they will also add to the mountains of empirical evidence proving the absurdity of Rational Choice.
4. What Durkheim could not have known: Après Durkheim

Several of the phenomena discussed in the previous section bore the imprint of globalization. An acute awareness of globalization as an ongoing reality-shaping and reshaping process is what sets our sociological imagination apart from that of Durkheim and his followers, who operated within the confines of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century nation-state and its social and institutional organization. Durkheim was, along with many of his disciples, a methodological nationalist whose sociology did accept change (indeed, as we have seen, coming to terms with social change was what prompted Durkheim to his intellectual efforts), but change within a sedentary system which was coincident with the nation-state. This is remarkable, for globalization was very much a reality in Durkheim’s days. Colonization and an increasingly integrated world economy – Hobsbawm’s “Age of Empire” (1987) – had brought the world to places such as Paris and London. But this world was seen through the specter of one’s country, the structures, needs and imagination of which depended, precisely and paradoxically, on its global reach.

The current phase of globalization is, on the one hand, qualitatively different from that of the Age of Empire, and this is to a very significant extent an effect of the Internet – a technology that changed the world in the last decade of the twentieth century, allowing a tremendous increase in speed, volume and density of global flows and networks (see Castells 1996; Eriksen 2001). Due to this change, Hobsbawm (2008: 155) observes how “the Empire expands wider still and wider”: the global Internet infrastructure and the pattern of traffic density mirrors, astonishingly, global patterns of information networks established in the late 19th century: persistent global inequalities are, in that sense, extended and expanded by the Internet (see Read 1992; Blommaert 2016b). And such processes shape as well as occur in a new environment of communication and information, the details of which we are beginning to understand (cf. Sargeant & Tagg 2014; Varis & van Nuenen 2017). The point in all of this is that those who prefer to believe that there is nothing fundamentally new to the current stage of globalization are quite dramatically wrong. We are indeed witnessing a very, very profound qualitative change with momentous effects on the nature and circulation of
knowledge and sociocultural norms, as well as on the structure of communities and social cohesion. More on this below.\textsuperscript{23}

But on the other hand, as said earlier: perhaps even more importantly, the present stage of globalization is accompanied by an \textit{awareness} of it, an awareness that social processes nowadays operate at a variety of scales, of which the nation-state is just one and the global reach of the worldwide web another. And this awareness is \textit{revisionist} in nature, as it forces us to revisit and redirect a sociological imagination circumscribed and colored by methodological nationalism. Both points – a qualitative difference and a different awareness of globalization – are things that did not belong to the worldview within which Durkheim and successors such as Parsons operated.

In what follows, I shall explore the revisionist effects of this. And I shall do this, somewhat provocatively, by sketching a series of \textit{theories} emerging from contemporary sociolinguistic work and using a simple assumption: if interaction is what makes us social, theoretical insights into interaction must have wider relevance and can be used as a template for theorization at a higher level.\textsuperscript{24} As noted at the very beginning, formulating theories is not exactly sociolinguists’ bread and butter – but the editor of a recent volume on theoretical debates in sociolinguistics explicitly invites it (Coupland 2016). So let me try.

It goes without saying that much of what I shall present here cannot strictly speaking be called “new” theory. Similar ideas have circulated throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and have gained currency in the first decade of the 21\textsuperscript{st} – echoes from Goffman, Giddens, Simmel and even Husserl will be heard, and I gladly join Castells (2010) in fact-checking and updating his own late 20\textsuperscript{th} century predictions. What sociolinguistics contributes, however, is a set of empirical arguments that make such theoretical propositions \textit{compelling} and \textit{inevitable}; it also offers an empirically solid basis for \textit{reformulations} of social theory. Note that while the previous section was largely retrospective, drawing on achievements from sociolinguistic

\textsuperscript{23} One can invoke the authority of Arjun Appadurai here: “This theory of a break – or rupture – with its strong emphasis on electronic mediation and mass migration, is necessarily a theory of the recent past (or the extended present) because it is only in the past two decades or so that media and migration have become so massively globalized, that is to say, active across large and irregular transnational terrains” (1996: 9).

\textsuperscript{24} I reiterate here an assumption already voiced by Anthony Giddens (1976: 127): “...(language as a practical activity is so central to social life that in some basic respects it can be treated as exemplifying social processes in general)” (italics in original). This assumption, in Giddens’ work, doesn’t lead to a structured attention to this “practical activity”, though. See the discussion in J.B. Thompson (1984: chapter 4).
research of the past decades, this section will be more prospective, drawing on current ongoing work, and therefore also programmatic in tone.

Since in what follows the discourse will change, it may not be a bad idea to specify what I understand by the term ‘theory’. What we call theory is a particular kind of statement. It is a statement that tries to describe and define a type of phenomena out there, in such a way that research on individual tokens of these phenomena can be hypothetically generalized.

Theories, then, are statements that enable a generalizable heuristics based on hypothesized type-token relationships. Such statements are, ideally and in the tradition of Anselm Strauss’ “Grounded Theory”, already saturated with evidence – they are, to some extent, already proven (cf. Holton 2008). But even if a theory is already backed up by a serious amount of supporting evidence, in each new piece of research it must operate as a question to be answered – or to use a more familiar terminology, as a working hypothesis.

4.1 Preliminary: A theory of vernacular globalization

There has been no shortage of globalization theories over the past couple of decades, and some of them are good. But sociolinguistics brings something exceptional to the field of globalization studies: a perspective in which the “big” movements in globalization (often called “flows”: Appadurai 1996) need to be constantly checked by the minutiae of on-the-ground communicative practices in which such global forces are being enacted and turned into locally performed meaning (see e.g. Pennycook 2007, 2010) – something for which Appadurai coined the term “vernacular globalization” (1996: 10). Observe that for Appadurai, vernacular globalization is more than just a descriptive term, it is a gloss for the general condition of contemporary modernity:25

“The megahoretic 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.)

To be sure, the dialectic of global and local forces in the experiential life-world of human beings (in other words, of vernacularization) is perhaps the most complicated descriptive and

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25 It can therefore also be read as a gloss for what we elsewhere describe as “superdiversity”. See Arnaut (2016); Arnaut et al (2017); Blommaert & Rampton (2016).
methodological issue in the study of globalization processes, and the introduction of a new generation of electronic media has certainly complicated matters. This was noticed early enough. Appadurai (1996: 194) noted “new forms of disjuncture between spatial and virtual neighborhoods” as an effect of the globalization of new electronic media, seriously complicating the actual meaning of a term such as “local practice”; he also saw the emerging of “diasporic public spheres” revealing new horizons for political and social action, usually imagined within the confines of the nation-state (1996: 22). Manuel 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 contained by the traditional boundaries of social groups. Both (and many more) 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 who felt addressed by this call were sociolinguists.

It is my thesis that contemporary sociolinguistics has almost comprehensively theorized vernacular globalization as a condition of everyday life, the framework of which can be sketched by the keywords polycentricity, mobility and complexity, which also count as its ontological assumptions.

**Polycentricity** stands for the fact that in every environment for social action, multiple sets of norms will be simultaneously present, although they might not be of the same order – they are scaled, stratified, and in that sense never ideologically neutral even if represented as such (Carr & Lempert 2016: 3). Polycentricity defines the intrinsic indeterminacy of social actions and processes, and their non-unified character: social change involves parts of society developing faster than others, creating anachronistic gaps.

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26 Odile Heynders (2016), in an insightful study, examines how such diasporic public spheres have altered the nature and impact of writers as public intellectuals. A variety of “traditional” social roles is affected by this transformation of the public sphere in which global rockstar status is no longer the privilege of sports and entertainment professionals (including US presidents), but now includes the likes of Thomas Piketty, author of a not-too-easily-readable book. Piketty is not the first scientist reaching global celebrity status in spite of the fact that very few of his admirers are able to say what exactly he is arguing for in his work – think of Einstein a century ago – but his fame remains a very rare phenomenon, certainly in a culture in which argumentative complexity is increasingly dispreferred.
**Mobility** is shorthand for the assumption that social life, even if “local” in so many senses of the word, is *never sedentary* but always moving from one chronotope into another one, across scales and centers of normative focus (cf. Blommaert 2015d). Mobility defines the intrinsic *instability* of social action and processes.

**Complexity** makes us aware of the fact that, even if every form of social activity evolves within a *system* of such activities, that system is always unfinished, dynamic, and nonlinear or stochastic in the sense that outcomes may not be predicted from initial conditions (cf. Blommaert 2016c). Complexity defines the intrinsic *tentativeness* and potential *redefinability* of social action and processes.

This is, of course, a mere sketch of a theory framework, which in essence represents a cumulative and generalized result of a wide variety of different more precise sociolinguistic theorizations. This theory of vernacular globalization, therefore, requires several other more specific theories, providing more clarity to the keywords. I shall now turn to these more specific theories.

### 4.2 An indexical-polynomic theory of social norms

Let us recall the insistence, throughout the Durkheimian tradition of sociology, on norms as the key to defining and understanding the social fact, and let us now return to the discussion in 3.1 above on ordered indexicality. In that earlier discussion, I explained how “norms”, in contemporary sociolinguistics, need to be seen as nonrandomly organized patterns of indexical order, and I stressed the collective and dialogical character of such sociolinguistic norms as a decisive argument against Rational Choice.

This is of course an ontological statement, and I believe we can broaden its scope from interaction and its ordered indexicals to social behavior in general. Seen from that angle, social norms are, in actual fact, *ordered sets of interactionally ratified behavioral details* which we can call “*behavioral scripts*”. Note, once more,

- That whatever is normative in social life is socially co-constructed in the process of interactional meaning-making, subject to continuous ratification by others, and therefore *tentative* in character; and
- that there is nothing *abstract* to “norms” (or “values”) other than the terms we use to describe them. In real social life, “norms” take on a variety of *concrete behavioral shapes*.\(^{27}\)

But that is not all there is to be said on this, certainly when we consider globalization and its sociolinguistic impact. In order to establish that, let us have a look at some research.

In a truly brilliant study, Sabrina Billings (2014) examined beauty pageants in Tanzania – an outlier, so to speak, in the world of English and of global mediascapes in Appadurai’s (1996: 33) terms. Billings focused on how the selection of the most appropriate candidate for Miss Tanzania (through a scaled procedure starting locally, then regionally, then nationally) invoked and deployed sociolinguistic hierarchies in which “good English” – fluent performance in a variety of English judged to be not-too-local – was the pinnacle of eligibility, even when, officially, candidates could produce public discourse in both Swahili (the national language) and English. Why is “good English” so important? Because it serves as a crucial indexical suggesting superiority on, at least, two levels: nationally and due to the particular sociolinguistic history of Tanzania, English is the prestige code associated with the status of being “educated” (Billings 2014: 38-53); internationally, because national pageant organizers operate within the “Miss World” format (Billings 2014: 61) and the Tanzanian winner will proceed to the global competition – where “good English”, once again, is a powerful diacritic.

“Good English”, as a diacritic in the pageant, is of course not sufficient: the young women competing for the title of Miss Tanzania must also be judged to be physically beautiful, elegant and intelligent (Billings 2014: 92-96). We see a *behavioral script* emerge here, in which discursive normativity – speaking in “good English” – is an element of the total order of indexicality that rules the pageant. But while it is not sufficient, “good English” is *decisive*. In several examples – quite painful to read – Billings shows how even top contenders can be mercilessly sanctioned by the critical audience when their on-stage discursive performance in English is judged to be inadequate. Describing audience reactions in one such case, Billings writes:

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\(^{27}\) It is very much worth underscoring this, because of the exceedingly abstract (and unrealistic) ways in which norms and values are being discussed in much academic work and most public debate. Durkheim’s own perspective, to his credit, was radically empirical and opposed to a priori generalization (Durkheim 1961: 26).
“The pageant-savvy audience sees through her flimsy effort to insert a memorized response to a different question into the answer slot. In attempting to present herself as a fluent speaker of standard English, the contestant has instead, through her inability to answer spontaneously, indexed herself as a linguistic phony.” (2014: 107)

The candidate’s discursive performance, in other words, was judged to be dishonest, and therefore a betrayal of the behavioral script she tried to produce – that of someone who is educated and smart (hence using “good English”) and worthy of proceeding to the Miss World election. Her discursive performance exposed her, in short, as a liar, and this was grounds for exclusion – norms, we can see again, have effective power effects.

Note two important points here.

(a) We see, one, that the ratification of the failed behavioral script is a judgment of the entire person, and the judgment is moral in tone and character: the candidate is dismissed because her sociolinguistic features were judged to be “untrue”, not authentic, not honest. We see that, in actual practice, the social norms of the Durkheimian world are moralized behavioral scripts. Note, pace Durkheim, that the moral is entirely concrete and empirical here, operating on a range of very concrete behavioral features.

(b) We also see how such judgments are scaled, with at last three different sets of criteria playing into each other in a mutually reinforcing way. There are the national and international indexical orders already mentioned above, and there is the order of the situated, actual moment of performance. The candidate stumbled over words, tried to start again, manifestly repeated an earlier statement, and produced a thick “local” accent in one expression – and all of this provoked cruel laughter from the audience. Into the perceived violation of local rules of performance, the national and international ones were infused by means of what Irvine & Gal (2000) called “fractal recursivity”, jointly and simultaneously resulting in a shattering judgment of the candidate.

This is where we can become more precise with respect to the notion of “polycentricity” mentioned earlier. Speech events such as the ones described by Billings are governed by various sets of norms operating on various “dimensions of social life” (Carr & Lempert 2016) and orienting towards different real or imagined centers of authority (Silverstein 1998; Blommaert 2005: 172). Some of these norms are general – think of the norms governing
genres such as public speech – while others will be specific – the norms of public speech in a beauty contest in Tanzania, for instance. We can see how this contributes to the theory of vernacular globalization sketched earlier.\textsuperscript{28}

Furthermore, I believe we can generalize this insight, certainly in the age of widespread social media usage. Communicative actions will always be subject to various simultaneously operating sets of norms, since they will always demand attendance to the rules of actual interactional conduct, those of the topic of the interaction, its purpose or function, the social and cultural conventions governing conduct within specific participant frameworks, particular spaces or times, specific types of encounters, and so forth. A Facebook update, for instance, demands attendance to the (highly dynamic) norms of literacy and linguistic codes, the genre and register norms of an “update” (not too long, preferably multimodal, etc.), the tacit norms of one’s community of “friends” regarding certain topics and ways to discuss them (think of prevalent political orientations in one’s Facebook community), the Facebook rules of conduct (proscribing certain forms of obscenity, for instance), and the rules of the algorithmic system behind Facebook that render certain updates more visible than others. And whether or not one is aware of these rules doesn’t really matter: every update will generate effects related to all these different but simultaneously operating sets of norms.

Thus, whenever we interact with others we find ourselves in a polynomic social arena. We do not respond to just one set of norms but to multiple sets of finely defined norms governing aspects of the specific interactional events and its context. We can call such sets of highly specific norms microhegemonies. And the presence of multiple microhegemonies turns every instance of social action into a polynomic social event.

Sociolinguistic work brings a far more precise and empirically verifiable theory of norms and normativity to social thought than most other approaches. When we think of “norms”, we see a polynomic complex of moralized behavior scripts: several concrete sets of ordered indexicals microhegemonically governing aspects of conduct, played out simultaneously towards, and with, interlocutors who continuously valuate them morally and feed these

\textsuperscript{28} One can profitably compare the view articulated here with Agha’s (2007) concept of “stereotypes” (or “models”, Gal 2016) – indexical complexes to which we orient whenever we communicate and that provide the referenced “type” of identity of which we provide “tokens” in our actual communicative conduct. One will find amidst overwhelming agreement two small differences. I emphasize the scaled multiplicity of such “stereotypes” – the polynomic nature of social conduct – and suggest a far broader behavioral field of ratification and uptake to be in play. In that sense, I am more inclined towards Symbolic Interactionism than Agha would, I presume, allow.
valuations back to us. And given the centrality of norms in any sociological imagination since Durkheim, this theory will have repercussions on others.

4.3 A genre theory of social action

Sociolinguistics has, for decades, been concerned with the notion of genre, as a historically established and socialized set of linguistic-communicative features (an order of indexicality, in other words) that enables specific forms of communicative behavior to be recognized as, for instance, a joke, a lecture, a confession, a poem, a novel (Halliday 1978; Hymes 1981; Bakhtin 1986; Fabian 1991; Blommaert 2008c). From such evidence, we also know that all communicative behavior is genred – or at least, that if we intend to make our communicative behavior understood by others, it needs to be recognizable as an instance of a specific genre. Genre, thus, operates very much in the sense specified above: while every instance is unique and special, recognizability is generic, i.e. it rests on the iterativity of the ordered indexicals pointing to specific genres. Every novel is recognizable as “a novel”, but still we have our favorite novels.

I believe this insight can be generalized. Social actions do not emerge from nowhere, not can they be seen as pure acts of creativity. They are performances based on already existing cultural material, always uniquely contextualized and situated, and therefore operating with a degree of creativity. So two dimensions are crucial here, for jointly they construct social actions as situated, performative genre work:

1. Iterativity: the usage of already existing genre templates;
2. Creativity: the deviation from such templates in unique instances of genre performance.

Iterativity provides what we can call the ‘structural’ aspect of social action. It ensures the recognizability of actions: they proceed largely within existing orders of indexicality that are interactionally understandable-as-something. Generic iterativity also turns situated social action into a fundamentally historical phenomenon – where does this iterated cultural material come from? How did it acquire its function as generic template? And thereby, of course, it should be seen as a crucial element in explaining sociocultural transmission and spread.
Creativity provides what we can call the ‘diversity’ aspect of social action. It ensures the uniqueness of the situated deployment and performance of genred features of action, of its participants, and of its chronotopic peculiarities – how does this particular situated instance of social action function in this particular way? Creativity, in that sense, can be seen as an “inflection” of genre templates, the small bits of deviation-from-a-model that turn the actual instance into something that triggers interactional uptake and appraisal. This particular lecture is nice, engaging and fun, versus boring, silly and uninteresting. It is still a lecture – the genre template has been satisfied – but it is a particular evaluated token of that type.

Creativity, however, also accounts for the contingent nature of social action (in the sense of Garfinkel 1967): the inevitable indeterminacy, open-endedness and uncertainty characterizing any form of social action and manifesting itself in the very well-known category of phenomena we call misunderstanding. And while creativity usually only accounts for a relatively minor part of social action – it is a small inflection of iterative templates – in everyday lived experience it prevails over the iterative basis of action. Our reactions and judgments of approval or rejection are based on the inflection, the ‘accent’, present in the uniquely performed act – which we can judge and react to because it is not entirely unique.

This genre theory has methodological consequences: the validity of examples in analysis rests on their generic recognizability, on the fact that through and beyond their unique situatedness, we can spot the larger, historical genre template for such social actions. Every instance of social action is evidently unique, but only to a degree. For it is also generic, and in that sense always a token of a type, “representative” of that type. The genre theory, therefore, can be seen as the grounding for an ethnography that satisfies both the demand for ecological validity and for representativeness.

An important remark must be placed here regarding current internet phenomena. In the iterative part of internet-based social action, the influence of algorithmic processes needs to be taken seriously. Such algorithmic processes are often described by means of terms such as “echo chamber effects” or “bubble effects” (Pariser 2011; Tufekci 2015; van Nuenen 2016), and they refer to the fact that machines organizing activity in, for instance, social media environments, create communities of people who (in the views of those designing such algorithms) should “share” something – interests, social characteristics, opinions, and so forth. Even if there is presently hardly a way in which we can profoundly and directly
examine this—these algorithms are among the best-kept industrial secrets—there is little doubt that their effects reinforce and enlarge the iterative features of actions, perhaps pushing them even towards new levels of generic uniformity. Research on this is, as said, extremely difficult, but when investigating online actions, it is wise to keep an awareness that not everything we observe is an effect of deliberate human choice and agency, but an artifact of algorithmic agency.

4.4 A microhegemonic theory of identity

I now move to two theories that are two sides of the same coin: a theory of identity, followed by another one of social groups that essentially extends the former. While there is no sensible way in which we can talk of identity without talking about the social groups in which identities are performed and enregistered, I separate them here for clarity’s sake, because identity and social groups are, in many studies, isolated as separate domains of study.

Communicative practice is always and invariably an act of identity. Sociolinguists have taken this insight on board since the mid-1980s (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985), turning it, as Allan Bell observes, into one of the most productive topics of sociolinguistic research in recent years (Bell 2016). Very few sociolinguists need to be convinced of the performative and creative nature of identity (in other words, of identity not as a given but as something that emerges in social action); of its dialogical nature (creating a difference between enacted and ascribed identities), of the plurality of identities; of the dynamics of “serious” and “ludic” identity work prevalent in practices such as “styling”; and of identity as a problem central to a complex politics of performance and ascription (for surveys, see De Fina, Schiffrin & Bamberg 2006; Coupland & Jaworski 2009; sophisticated examples include Harris 2006; Rampton 2006; Möller 2017). So here too, we can draw extensively on sociolinguistic insights.

This could be helpful, for the problem of categorization (another word for identity ascription) in research is an old one in social and human studies, notably in quantitative ones where a degree of stability in research design is mandatory across the sample. No one has described the problem more incisively (and casually) than Erving Goffman:

“The variables which emerge tend to be creatures of research designs that have no existence outside the room in which the apparatus and subjects are located, except
perhaps briefly when a replication or ‘continuity’ is performed under sympathetic auspices and a full moon” (1971: xxv; for a more terse discussion see Cicourel 1974).

There is an assumption that every subject can (and perhaps should) be determined as to identity by describing him/her along essential bureaucratic parameters such as nationality, age, gender, social class, ethnicity, religious affiliation, profession; extended, sometimes, to include educational qualifications, income, family relationships, sexuality and health status. And this, let us note, is where we continue to feel the full weight of the Durkheimian tradition in research, for those are the diacritics of the modern “thick” communities that have preoccupied macrosociological research in the tradition we associate with him. The assumption, reformulated, is that we can know and understand society when we divide it into segments and relationships based on these identity categories.

In contrast to that tradition, I propose to see identities as *chronotopically organized moralized behavioral scripts*; I use the term *microhegemonies* as shorthand for that contorted phrase. And let me now explain what I mean by that.

Let us recapitulate some of the elements in Sabrina Billings’ study of the role of language in Tanzanian beauty contests, discussed above. We saw how the use of language – particular forms of English, to be more precise – was a key part of a larger set of features displayed by the contenders, and judged by the audience and the jury in relation to perceived norms of “good” conduct in such events. In fact, what we saw was that “beauty queen” – an ascribed identity category – needed to be *performed* by enacting a set of different, dispersed “qualities” – beauty, intelligence, education levels, humor – of which perceived fluency in “good” English was emblematic. I emphasized that this normative system was polycentric and scaled, with local and nonlocal norms piled up onto one another, and that the judgment passed by the audience when one of the contenders failed to display the expected fluency in “good” English, this was a moral judgment of the entire person: she was seen and condemned as a phony.

The judgment, an identity judgment, in other words, was a *moralization* of the degree of normativity perceived in the contender’s display of a composite set of behavioral norms – a *behavioral script* that needs to be followed to some degree of satisfaction – which was specific to the occasion of the beauty pageant – it was *chronotropic*. 
The latter is of critical importance. We long know from a wide and highly diverse literature that people do not “have” an identity but perform identities. In the observable conduct of people, there is no such thing as “identity”: we can observe concrete, situated and contextualized identity work. This contextualization is of paramount importance: we need to adjust our identity work to the highly specific demands of particular contexts. To unpack that last term: “context”, in actual fact, is a concrete timespace configuration in which particular forms of identity are expected, required or optional, and in which, consequently, we need to deploy highly particular resources drawn from what we can conveniently call “identity repertoires” (cf. Blommaert 2005: 234; Blommaert & De Fina 2017). Concretely: the beauty pageant, with its complex layered normative orientations to global and local diacritics of success and failure, is a specific chronotope. The contenders can only be given the identity of “beauty queen” in the timespace configuration of the pageant; outside of it, a contender would be an office clerk, somebody’s daughter, a student, and what not. “Beauty queen” and the behavioral scripts out of which it is constructed, are things that are specific to that particular chronotope – just as bicycle racers can only call themselves “world champion” when they have won one particular race, the world championship race. Identity work, in that sense, is never “all over the place”, it is very much connected to specific timespace niches.

Chronotopes help us get a precise grip on what we mean by mobility in this stage of online-offline globalization. We perpetually move from one chronotope into another, then back to the first and on to a third, and so forth. And we can describe in detail how such moves actually proceed, in physical as well as in sociocultural, politicized space. A shift from one chronotope into another, we can see, involves a massive shift in identity opportunities and criteria of judgment: what works well in one chronotopic environment may backfire in another, and vice versa. Lian Malai Madsen’s (2015) study of a martial arts club in Copenhagen is a case in point. The club is superdiverse in composition and counts a large number of young Copenhageners with a migration background. These “migrant youth” are publicly seen and often described as “poorly integrated”, marginalized young people, both educationally and in the labor market. They are a social problem. But in the martial arts club, they are often the stars, the centers of attention and bearers of prestige and status as champions. In the club, we see a carnivalesque reversal of everything these youngsters are outside of it. Their skills, competences and patterns of performance – the same ones as those that give them the negative ascribed identities mentioned a moment ago – are seen as fully integrated, as signs of extraordinary capability and even as things to be emulated by others.
In Madsen’s study, we see quite profound identity shifts sequentially, as subjects move from one chronotope into another one. Chronotopes can and do simultaneously overlap as well – this is one of the aspects of what I call polycentricity. A mathematics class, for instance, is of course an institutionally regimented chronotope in which form and contents are tightly scripted and policed by the teacher; but that class may at the same time be seen as a congregation of teenage peer groups, an entirely different chronotope following a (sometimes dramatically) different set of normative behavioral expectations than those imposed by the school and the teacher, and displaying a highly different dynamics of identity as well: the underperforming student in the eyes of the teacher may be, because of exactly the same behavioral features, the coolest kid in class and a role model for his peers. In fact, we can see Goffman’s (1959) famous distinction between “front stage” and “backstage” as two simultaneously overlapping chronotopes, each with their own identity affordances and systems of normative organization; and many of the interaction rituals he described can be reconsidered as microhegemonies specific to particular chronotopic environments as well (Goffman 1967, also 1961, 1981; see also Silverstein 2005). Goffman’s oeuvre, in fact, can be seen as a consistent engagement with how Americans in his time organized their social relations through forms of interactional behavior adjusted to the chronotopes they inhabited – hence titles such as “Relations in Public” or “The lecture” (Goffman 1971, 1981, chapter 4).

Goffman described the microhegemonies of an offline society. It is evident that the online social space has enabled a multiplication of available chronotopes and relations between chronotopes, and thus generates a wide range of new modes of identity work. Since a tremendous amount of research is presently in the process of being rolled out, I must confine myself here to a general sketch of available insights, and start with some comments on the particular communicative practices we observe in the online world (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 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). 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” by means Twitter retweets, or just an “acquaintance” by means of 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 are useful offline and now also profoundly influence such offline practices (Leppänen 2007; Maly & Varis 2015; Blommaert 2016d). 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 microhegemonically expected or permitted in the chronotope of Facebook and that of the school playground (think of cyber bullying) or the workplace (think of employers monitoring employees’ social media accounts). The chronotopic nature of identities thus now evidently creates an enormous panorama of possible and expected identities, vastly more than those captured by the bureaucratic, ‘thick’ diacritics I mentioned at the outset. The variation of chronotopes we move through in social life demands, and endows us with, a plethora of ‘light identities’, if you wish, not excluding the old and established ‘thick’ categories but complementing them – “big” diacritics such as race, gender, class or ethnicity are not absent, but they are performed in different and sometimes surprising ways (e.g. Rampton 2006; Harris 2006; boyd 2011; Goebel 2015; Wang 2015; Faudree 2015; Fox & Sharma 2016).

At the level of everyday experience, however, our identities and those of others depend strongly on details of behavior and appearance, of which a certain amount needs to be displayed and performed – identities, one can see, are judged on the basis of perceptions of “enoughness” (Blommaert & Varis 2015). We can see a reflex of the genre theory of social action here: identity work is evidently genre-based, and it will display the same calibration between tendencies towards similarity and tendencies towards deviation as the one we encountered when we discussed genres.

4.5 A theory of “light” social groups

The discussion of identity already showed that the ‘thick’ diacritics of identity are not out, but that they are 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. This obviously has a bearing on the
discussion of social groups as well.

This discussion has a very long pedigree. Classics of sociology 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 by the nation-state – the features believed to be were less subject
to rapid or radical change – as distinct from features that were seen as “superficial”, transient
or less reliable as indicators of “social structure”.

Here is what Georg Simmel had to say about it. Noting that the sociology of his era still had
to prove its right to exist, notably against proponents of Methodological Individualism,
Simmel emphasizes the fact of interaction as the eminently social phenomenon – see above –
and then observes (1950: 9):

“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”.

We have already encountered the same tendency towards preferring such “thick” and
permanent forms of organization in the work of Parsons, 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 articulated an awareness of 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”.

Homogeneity, independence or autonomy, and 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 poker 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 when it comes to understanding
‘society’, attention should go to the ‘thick’ communities, and amendments to the established
set of “thick” communities, potentially dislodging the consensus about its consistency and
stability, invariably led to considerable controversy.29

Simmel, as 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

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29 One can think of the many energetic 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.
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)30

In other words – and here is a methodological invective 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).31

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. I already explained that, in addition, sociolinguists began to understand quite a while ago that very little can be learned from Language (with a capital L) about the actual social functions and effects of language. In other words: 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. Even more: a privileged site for research, offering analytical breakthroughs of momentous importance, 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; Jörgensen 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:

30 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.
31 We see affinities here between Simmel’s methodological view and phenomenology, especially Husserl’s discussion of the “life-world” as the subjective basis for objectivity (Backhaus 2003).
• Online social practices generate a broad range of entirely new forms of “light”
  community;
• 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 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; the approximately ten million people who play the mass
online game World of Warcraft are another type of unprecedented community; and so are 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 indispensible 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 term of third-party priorities ranging from
marketing to intelligence gathering and security concerns.
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 paper, 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. The global features of the groups are largely internet-based imageries of lifestyle, consumption ethos, outlook 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 around the world. The Internet, thus, functions as a learning environment for the various norms that shape and police hipster culture. 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. All these micro-populations could be more finely described as groups of people who are translocally connected as what we could call communities of knowledge, while locally they occur 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.

Their was, however, an “offline” description, and 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 constricted by the 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 this phenomenon – and to take it seriously as a relevant feature of the sociological imagination. Such communities of knowledge are usually just that: online communities or “fora” where information on an endless 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). 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
And 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 to maintain a restrictive Internet censorship policy. Caixia Du’s (2016) study of the online activities of the Chinese precariat can serve to 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, 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”

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32 Trumps 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 social media campaign – leading to frequent allegations of “fake news”. See Maly (2016) for a first appraisal.
practices with a “thick” effect: social cohesion, within online groups and, increasingly, also spilling over into the offline world.

4.6 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”: the sharing 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 of them – in which immigrants are blamed for not being “fully integrated”, or more specifically, “remaining stuck in their own culture” and “refusing” to integrate in their host society.

Half a century ago, in a trenchant critique of Parsons, 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. I 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 “completely 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.

Let us look at some corroborating research. 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 communication technologies in their interactions with others. She investigated the technologies proper – mobile phone and online applications – as well as the language resources used in specific
patterns of communication with specific people. Here is a graphic representation of the results for one male respondent (Brandehof 2014: 38).

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 languages: Standard English, Cameroonian Pidgin, local languages (called “dialects” in the figure), and Fulbe (other respondents also reported Dutch as one of their languages). 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 set of family and business activities back in Cameroon. Each of these activities – here is the order and nonrandomness – involves a conscious choice of medium, language variety and addressee. 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, on religious topics, are done in Fulbe, a language marked as a medium among Muslims.

Our subject is “integrated”, through the organized use of these communication instruments, in several “cultures” if you wish. 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. 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 remains 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 networks and so forth.

This level of simultaneous integration across cultures (if you wish), both “thick” and “light” ones, is necessary. Our subject intends to complete his doctoral degree work in Ghent and return as a highly qualified knowledge worker to Cameroon. Rupturing the Cameroonian networks might jeopardize his chances of reinsertion in a lucrative labor market (and business ventures) upon his return there. 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 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 century: “diaspora” no longer entails a total rupture with the places and communities of origin; neither, logically, does it entail a “complete integration” in the 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. Castells’ “network society” (1996), in short. We see that diasporic subjects keep one foot in the “thick” community of family, neighborhood and local friends, 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, they 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 Bauman’s famous “traveler 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 of an itinerant 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 Parsonian theory 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” (and complaints about the failure to do so) can best be seen as nostalgic and, when uttered in political debates, as ideological false consciousness. Or more bluntly, as sociological surrealism.

4.7 Constructures

In social science, social structure is very often used as a target of analysis – one intends to say something about the “structural” level of social organization; and it is also often used as a methodological tool – one identifies a level of social reality called “structure”, and such
structures contribute to the analysis of the case examined. Some of the most epochal and influential social-scientific work was work addressing just that: the emergence and solidification of “structural” dimensions of society – think of the work of Parsons (1937) or that of Giddens (1984). “Structure”, it seems, is the most “macro” dimension of social life, and “structural” is the most general level of statements made in its analysis. In Fernand Braudel’s famous distinctions in time-scales, the “structure” was situated in the realm of the longue durée: the time of civilizations, of modes of production, of the climate and the demography of parts of the world (e.g. 1969; 1981). And for C. Wright Mills and several others – think of Weber and Parsons – social structure can be described mainly by attention to the institutional orders within the nation-state, and “[i]f we understand how these institutional orders are related to one another, we understand the social structure of a society” (Mills 1959: 134). The consensus appears to be that “structure” refers to phenomena at the level of “the total society” (Mills 1959: 137) and show a persistent, slowly developing character. In that sense, work such as that of Appadurai (1996) and Castells (1996) addresses newly emerging structures. By the same token, of course, teleological models of social evolution, such as those of Hegel and Marx, would be “structural”.

One will have some difficulty finding detailed descriptions of what “structure” actually is, how it can be empirically identified and how it relates to the chaotic specifics of the everyday social processes we can observe. Attempts such as those of Giddens – who was explicit in his definitions of structure – remain open to critique and controversy (see e.g. Thompson 1984, chapter 4). Mostly, “structure” is used in a loosely defined way, in the sense I outlined above. And once more, if we use what we know about language in social life as the fundamental imagery for social science, we may offer a somewhat more precise set of formulations.

Let me first sketch the field of arguments in which I shall situate my proposals. I wish to steer clear from two quite widespread frames of reference for discussing structure.

- First, “structure”, certainly in a Lévi-Straussian variety of structuralism, has acquired strong suggestions of absoluteness, abstractness, predictability, anonymity, atemporality and staticity. Structure, as the guiding value system of a society, is that which provides enduring stability to a social system and makes it resilient – as Parsons suggested – to the onslaught of cultural revolutions from within youth culture (Parsons 1964). And even if structure is the outcome of active structuration at a
variety of scale levels in social life (Giddens 1984; Thompson 1984), most scholars would still use the term to describe dominant (if not determining) rules, values or principles driving the development of societies across timespace. It is also quite often presented as a social force operating below the level of consciousness and agency of people, a set of tacit and not always “emicly” well-understood aspects of social life – as in the “deep structure” of Chomskyan Transformational Grammar..

- Two, “structure” is often seen as something antagonistic to “postmodernist” and “mobility/complexity” approaches to social life. While traditional (“modernist”) social science would be on the side of anonymous static structure, “postmodernist” science would favor individual agency and instability, and thus become at once “poststructuralist” – in an unrealistic either/or frame in which methodological preferences appear to lead directly to ontological strictures. It is rarely observed that scholars such as Bourdieu and Foucault did not just reject any concept of structure but reject a specific one: the Lévi-Straussian one referred to above. They rejected a certain kind of structuralism (“poststructuralism” would be more accurately defined as “post-Lévi-Straussism”) but not “the structural” as a dimension of social systems. In general, this false antagonism often renders more nuanced understandings of structure invisible.

Many fail to recognize that complexity is not the absence of order, but a different kind of order. I shall therefore use another term to make my point. Rather than using “structure”, I shall use “constructure” in what follows. New terms enable us to examine the validity of the older ones, and they also afford some measure of detachment from unwarranted intertextual readings. “Constructure” is not technically speaking a neologism – it is an archaic term that offers a nice collocation of “structure” and “construction”. The latter term, as can be seen, can easily be changed into “agency”, and so we have a concept in which both dimensions, often seen as antagonistic, are heuristically and analytically joined.

The baseline assumption - one that, I hope, is entirely uncontroversial - is that any social event is structured: there is always “order” in any observed social event. But from a complexity perspective on sociolinguistic phenomena and processes, this order is always:

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33 Nik Coupland walks into the trap of such false antagonism: “We may have reached a metatheoretical peak in the fetishising of mobility and the antagonistic critiquing of structure, stability, and stasis” (2016: 440 and discussion 440-442).
• **Dynamic and unstable**: order is always a temporally contingent quality because systems are perpetually unfolding and changing; (E.g. describing language at one point in time will necessarily result in a description which is different from what was current a generation ago, as well as from what will be current in the next generation).

• **Unfinished and stochastic**: given the perpetual change, any momentary observation of “order” will contain open-ended, quickly evolving features anticipating new forms of “order”; it will also contain features that are contested and conflictual, and features in the process of being eliminated or established; (E.g. archaisms and neologisms, short-lived as well as more lasting ones, are always part of any synchronic observation of language). It is stochastic in the sense that today’s structure might be yesterday’s exception, and that outcomes are quite often not predictable from initial conditions, but “accidental” or deviant in terms of what was seen as dominant.

• **non-unified**: any “order” consists of a mixture of different forces, developing at different speeds and with different scope and range; (E.g. the different registers and genres in anyone’s repertoire have different speeds of development, with “standard” registers usually slower in development than e.g. youth registers – hence our sense of “trendiness”).

As just noted, we are used to reserve the term “structure” for the slower, more persistent forces, the *durée*, the *macro* dimension of social processes I suggest we avoid this micro-macro distinction and consider *the entire mix* when we use the term “constructure”, because given the complexity perspective, there is no telling a priori which of the features in the mix will determine future developments – change often happens in the margins and begins a statistical minority or exception, often negatively qualified. Think of the spectacular rise of emoticons as part of several mainstream genres of writing nowadays. Emoticons have not *replaced* the conventional forms of alphabetic writing – we still write from left to right, and we still use the conventional “orthographic” symbols we associate with the written form of the language we are using. Emoticons have been added to the mix of contemporary writing, so to speak, they represent what we could call a “light” feature, blended with the “big” features of conventional orthography. In terms of functions, too, we should not associate “structure” a priori with “thick” functions but do justice to “light” functions such as that of conviviality, discussed above. They are, as we saw, only “light” from the kind of transcendental structuralism I dismissed at the outset.
Constructures are, thus, a permanently unfolding mix of various separate “structures”, the momentary deployment of which in social practice grants the latter a degree of orderliness, recognizable and ratifiable for others.

Going back to our theory of social action, we can see how in constructures, we can unify traditional notions of “structure” and “agency”. Slightly rephrased, we have a tool for recognizing two essential characteristics of social life, and we already discussed it above – iterativity and creativity. Most of the behavior we deploy socially is overwhelmingly iterative, but slightly inflected by unique, creative and situated performativity. Observe, however, that I do not equate iterativity with stability and creative performativity with change. The entire mix is continuously changing, including the “iterative” aspects of it. Detaching the performative “accent” from the iterative “structure” obscures the fact that, for people in everyday practice, the “accent” is often the essence of what they perceive as meaningful in social action. And it is by means of the performative “accent” that the iterative features of behavior are also transformed into unique and creative characteristics of specific social actions performed by specific people. All of this was made clear earlier, when we discussed the genre theory of social action; its relevance here is evident.

Rather than as a concept that points towards the stability of social systems – the simplistic interpretation of “structure”, noted above – constructure thus points to the permanently changing nature of social systems and to the way they change. When we read Erving Goffman’s observations on social life in the US of the 1950s and 1960s, we can still recognize a great deal of it today, even if much of our social life these days is performed in a social space that didn’t exist in Goffman’s world: the virtual space of social media. Interaction in this virtual world is organized along different sets of norms many of which differ strongly from the ones Goffman detected in face-to-face engagements. Online sociality, however, has not replaced the Goffmanian world of social interaction – the mix has changed. Which is why we can still recognize ourselves in Goffman’s work, even if we realize that large chunks of our lives are led in very different ways. The constructures have changed.
4.8 Anachronism as power

Finally, I also propose a theory of power; not a general one (power *per se*) but a *specific* one, about one kind of institutional power. Two points of departure underlie the effort here.

1. In *The Utopia of Rules*, David Graeber describes the fundamental stupidity of contemporary bureaucratization, observing the spread of what he calls “power without knowledge”: “where coercion and paperwork largely substituted for the need for understanding (...) subjects” (2015: 65). The contemporary power of bureaucrats often involves an assumption of total knowledge (articulated, e.g. in Foucault’s work). Graeber, however, disagrees: “situations of structural violence invariably produce extremely lopsided structures of imaginative identification” (69): rulers have no clue about who and what their subjects are, what it is they do, what they attach importance to, how they live. The schematization and simplification of bureaucracy serve as a substitute for intimate and experience-based knowledge, but evidently fail to match up to that.

2. A decent amount of applied-linguistic work, notably on bureaucratic procedures such as asylum applications, shows how transnational subjects, often carrying the traces of a checkered diasporic biography, are nonetheless caught in administrative templates in which their “origins” are determined on the basis of imaginations of nation-state regimes of bureaucratic identity and on “modernist” theories of language (cf. Maryns 2006; Blommaert 2001, 2009; Jacquemet 2015). Concretely: if applicants’ claims as to origin (being from country X) are being disputed, knowledge of the official, national languages of Country X is used as a definitive test. If one fails this criterion, asylum is being denied. The same happens whenever an applicant provides discourse which is sensed to violate the rules of denotational purity: whenever s/he produces contradictions, silences, a muddled chronology or a lack (or overload) of detail, the applicant is judged to be untrustworthy and the success of his/her application is jeopardized.

The “lopsided structures of imaginative identification” described by Graeber, we can see, in actual fact assume the shape of *anachronisms*: schemes of social imagination, and thus of patterns of meaning-making, perhaps valid in an earlier stage of development, but not adjusted to recent changes and thus inadequate to do justice to the phenomenology of present
cases. At the same time, these obsolete schemata are strongly believed to have an unshakeable, persistent relevance as a rationality of administrative information-organization, and are enforced from within that rationality. Thus, _an important part of contemporary institutional power is based on anachronisms._

Anachronisms are, of course, an inevitable feature of social change, and we know that governmentality – the logic of institutional bureaucracy and governance – is widely characterized by inertia. It represents a segment of society which develops more slowly than the segments it is supposed to deal with. The gap between the phenomena to be addressed, and the schemata by means they are addressed, is a grey zone of uncertain understanding and often arbitrary judgment – and thus, increasingly, of miscarriage of justice and of litigation.

In terms of research, such anachronistic gaps offer a very rich site for investigating social change itself. It is based on the general image of social change described elsewhere: an image of different layers developing at different speeds. The different speeds manifest themselves in actual, situated cases of misunderstanding (or rather: the _incapacity_ for understanding) and/or of experienced injustice.

The awareness of anachronisms is nothing new, needless to say. Durkheim’s own efforts, we have seen, were grounded in his conviction that “society” had not been adjusted to an important range of innovations caused by the industrialization and urbanization of France. Similar views, of an old social order being crushed under the weight of a new one, are widespread in the sociological literature. What this theory of anachronisms as power now offers, is _accuracy_. When earlier generations saw “society” being ill adapted to innovation, they couldn't possibly mean _all_ of society, for the parts that had been innovated were also very much part of that society. What we can contribute, therefore, is a highly precise focus when we look at such phenomena. The anachronisms are _particular modes of organizing social interaction through specific patterns of meaning-making:_ categorization, the connection of different phenomena, objects or persons in specific sets of relationships to each other (as when an asylum seeker is brought in a certain relationship with national languages in determining his/her origins), patterns of argumentation and the ways in which we attribute judgments of persuasiveness to certain such patterns. My proposed theory enables us to look for very precise objects of analysis that can document change and the anachronistic effects that accompany it.
Evidently, the Internet as an infrastructure that has brought substantial innovation to the modes of social interaction now common around the world, is prone to such anachronisms. It is a segment of contemporary social life that develops at very high speed, while our modes of meaning-making are slow to be synchronized. Thus, we talk about, and in, new modes of internet communication very much in ways reflecting an pre-internet complex of social relationships. A very clear and simple example of this is the fact that Facebook, the largest social media platform in the world founded in 2004, uses one of the oldest and most primitive terms in the vocabulary for human relationships as its core tool: “friends”. Evidently, Facebook “friends” are not necessarily coterminous with offline friends. Facebook also uses a similarly ancient and primitive term to describe the most common interaction function on its platform: “like”. And evidently, this “like” function covers a very broad and extraordinarily heterogeneous range of actual meanings. No-one needs to actually like an update in order to “like” it, and no-one needs to be an actual friend in order to become a Facebook “friend” (which is why s/he can be easily and swiftly “defriended” whenever differences of opinion arise).

Those are of course innocuous phenomena, merely indexing the anachronistic gaps caused by developments in social media. Less innocent, but very difficult to pinpoint, are the effects of some of the organizing principles behind social media: the algorithmic engines used by e.g. Google and Facebook to bring people, messages and zones of social activity together on the basis of aggregations of huge amounts of data and metadata generated by users. These algorithms, as mentioned earlier, cannot be not be directly examined. But some of their effects are known.

All of us, I am sure, have at times error-clicked some advertisement on a social media page – let’s say, an advertisement for the newest model of urban SUV by Peugeot. All of us must have noticed how in the days following that erroneous click, multiple advertisements for cars appear on almost any page we open, usually cars in the same price range as the Peugeot we error-clicked. Less visible, perhaps, is the fact that in our social media newsfeeds, we are likely to encounter more people who recently clicked such advertisements in the days following our error-click, most likely people from our contacts network and people in the same geographical area as us. And also less visible, perhaps, is the fact that our perceived interest in cars of a certain brand and price range will be correlated with other data we produce through our social media usage – other products we express an interest in, other
aspects of lifestyle, other persons, perhaps political views or preferences for certain sports or sports teams – all of this resulting in a permanently updated “algorithmic identity”, of certain interest for marketing and security professionals, over which we ourselves do not have any control, let alone agency.34

Although we can, as I said, gauge these procedures from a distance only, we can infer from what we know that these algorithms are anachronisms too. They are overwhelmingly linear and reductionist: linear, for clicking an item is interpreted as necessarily rational and deliberate – the mind-reading procedures of the algorithm exclude the possibility that we clicked the button by accident. And reductionist in the sense that clicks are seen as inspired by very specific forms of interest in the thing we clicked – an interest, for instance in buying that object rather than to just admire it or confirm our opinion that such things are absurdly expensive.

The algorithmic identities thus ascribed to us may be light years removed from the actual motives driving our social conduct and from the ways in which we see ourselves. Well known, for instance, is that at a certain time when terrorism alert worldwide was red-hot, Googling for information on pressure cookers was algorithmically flagged as suspicious because these mundane receptacles happened to be widely used in manufacturing home-made explosive devices. Which is an activity performed, fortunately, by very few individuals; but in order to locate these individuals, a great many more must have come under close scrutiny by security and intelligence officials - for no reason other than, perhaps, they contemplated buying a very nice pressure cooker so as to boost the quality of their bowl of evening soup.

Patterns of human interaction and meaning-making are the most sensitive indicators of social change – every neologism in our everyday language usage demonstrates this. If we wish to understand the fine grain of social change, close attention to these patterns is therefore sure to offer far more analytical purchase than almost any other aspect of social life. Power, too, can be investigated by looking at the anachronisms characterizing patterns of interaction and meaning-making deployed in governance; it can be looked at in very great detail.

34 The link between these issues and security concerns cannot be explored fully here, but has been extensively documented and discussed in e.g. Rampton 2016b; Charalambous et al 2016; Khan 2017.
5. The sociological re-imagination

The world which was puzzling Durkheim has changed and has become the world of Castells and Appadurai. It has changed constructurally: parts of that old world persists while entirely new parts have entered it, most prominently a new global infrastructure for sociality – the Internet – which affects the entire planet, including those segments of it where it is rare or absent. The interplay of these different parts demands a new sociological imagination, and my effort towards that goal was guided by a simple assumption: that a number of insights into contemporary patterns of social interaction can be generalized and provide a sociolinguistically animated re-imagination of the social world, characterized by what Arjun Appadurai called “vernacular globalization”.

Recall what Appadurai meant by this delicate concept: the fact that globalized societies (and there are none that are not globalized) must be comprehended through the interplay of large and small “structures”, if you wish, through disciplined attention to the big translocal things and their interactions with the small local ones – what Arnaut et al. (2017) aptly call the “poeisis-infrastructures nexus”. This nexus is the intersection of locally contextualized practices of meaning making with higher-scale conditions for meaning making. The very object of sociolinguistics, in other words, and what sociolinguistics contributes to social science is precisely that: a meticulously empirical perspective on this nexus, in which the object is the nexus itself and not its – artificially and counterproductively established – “micro” and “macro” dimensions. No contemporary sociolinguist can afford to examine the facts of language in society without considering simultaneously and as part of the same phenomenon, the “micro” facts of situated discourse and their “macro”-sociolinguistic conditions of becoming and performance (cf. Blommaert 2005). This nexus-object enables us now to propose an empirically grounded (and thus non-speculative and non-“metaphysical”) sociological re-imagination – an imagery in which “the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated”, to repeat C. Wright Mills’ famous words.

Sociolinguistics does, however, more than that. Theories derived from its evidence cannot subscribe to Methodological Individualism (let alone Rational Choice), as I hope to have established convincingly in section 3 above. They are inevitably grounded in that essential and irreducible social dimension of human life: interaction between people in a comprehensible, and therefore shared, meaningful code following a set of “grammars” as I
called it earlier. All the theories I have proposed here, therefore, contradict and invalidate individualistic views of human behavior, including so-called “neoliberal” views of unconstrained social action. If “action” is “interaction”, it is only partially open to choice, and it is entirely controlled and constrained by the resources available and accessible to the interlocutors and to normative-evaluative uptake by others. Our freedom as social agents, to paraphrase this in a different jargon, is seriously curtailed (and has to be) as soon as we try to communicate it to others. It remains perplexing to see that a part of social theory has not come to terms with this elementary – defining – fact of communication.

There will be those who ask “where is power in your theories?” The answer is: everywhere. Sociolinguistic evidence, in my view, compels us to embrace Foucault’s conception of power as dispersed, norm-focused and capillary, present in every aspect of social behavior, and crystallized – often in the form of anachronisms, see above – in contemporary modes of institutional governmentality. The latter produce and reproduce, let us note, significant amounts of infrastructural violence (Rodgers & O’Neill 2012), by policing access to the normative resources that (often tacitly, as in the case of standard forms of language and literacy: Hymes 1996) condition the realization of what Bourdieu (1982) called “legitimate language”; or that control, as do the algorithms directing social media traffic, the shaping of communities and the identities of their members. The indexical-polynomic organization of normativity in communication makes power total and inevitable across the entire specter of observation. I believe we need such a view to start addressing – not a minute too soon – the new forms of power, inequality and conflict that now characterize the online-offline world and of which people such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, but also Donald Trump, are uncomfortable reminders.

The same answer will be given to those asking “where are gender, race, class, ethnicity in your approach?” There, too, we must see that such diacritics are always present, but rarely alone, usually as part of a polynomic and polycentric pattern of social action in which they co-occur with several other identity resources. As I repeatedly underscored, the “big” sociological category diacritics are not absent (certainly not when we consider institutional governmentality) but they are as a default chronotopically niched and most often complemented by a very broad range of other identity “accents”. Whenever specific identity diacritics are isolated in interaction, they are part of a pattern of generic argumentation that demands careful analysis. I have therefore not hocus-pocused these big diacritics away, and so obfuscated racism, sexism and other forms of social category abuse. I have given them, I
believe, a very precise location in social action enabling extremely accurate analysis, which should protect us from loose generalization or over-interpretation. For as Dell Hymes rightly proclaimed: “[i]t is no service to an ethnic group to right the wrong of past exclusion by associating it with shoddy work” (1996: 80).

At the end of the road, the theories I have proposed all revolve around one thing: enabling an accurate description of people’s place in society – of who they are, what they are capable of doing, what they effectively do, and what their actions produce in the way of social effect. I consider this a matter of social justice: a science that neglects, marginalizes or dismisses as irrelevant important parts of what people are and do, is a science doomed to generate a deeply flawed image of society; and a governance based on such science is bound to discriminate, incriminate and exclude. Which explains my radical opposition to Rational Choice and related theories as fundamentally unrealistic instances of sociological imagination, contradicted by all available sociolinguistic evidence. The sociological imagination, we should keep in mind, is a tremendously important and extraordinarily potent political tool; theoretical critique and theoretical reconstruction, therefore, are exercises of substantial “applied” relevance.
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https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/6ed0ff66-891c-4cbf-bf2f-0abfa633aa61_tpcs%20paper35.pdf


