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New modes of interaction, new modes of integration: A sociolinguistic perspective on a sociological keyword

by

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New modes of interaction, new modes of integration:

A sociolinguistic perspective on a sociological keyword

Jan Blommaert, Jelke Brandehof, Monika Nemcova

Introduction¹

In late November 2017, a new round of a never-ending language-ideological debate took place in Belgium (cf. Blommaert 1997, 1998, 2011; Blommaert & Verschueren 1998). A large network of schools in Flanders had announced that non-Dutch-mother tongue pupils would be allowed to use their first languages during class breaks and, on limited occasions, during class sessions as well. The Flemish-nationalist party N-VA (the leading party, at the time, in Belgian politics) instantly condemned this measure as unwelcome, for it would lead to ethnolinguistic “segregation” and, thence, to further problems with the “integration” of non-Dutch-mother tongue groups in Flemish-Belgian society. In the eyes of N-VA politicians, “integration” could *only* be achieved through a totalized Dutch monolingualism stretching into all corners of Flemish-Belgian society. A nationalist MP summarized this view in a Tweet addressed to Jan Blommaert. Note a detail here that should not escape us: the politician interacts through a very new infrastructure, social media. We shall come back to this later. First, let us consider the politician’s Tweet (Figure 1):

¹ This paper forms part of the “Online with Garfinkel” project and summarizes elements from the “Durkheim and the Internet” project. For a survey of the latter, see Blommaert (2018). In both projects, an attempt is made towards re-theorizing contemporary society, its features and dynamics, on the basis of a sociolinguistic methodology and sociolinguistic findings. A much shorter outline of the central argument in this paper can be found in Blommaert (2016).



Figure 1: Tweet by N-VA representative, 27 November 2017. Translation: “Excuse me. Dutch = integration. So fully in the picture. Speaking Dutch makes one forget differences”

We encounter a highly simplified view here of the connection between language and social integration, or even more generally, between language and social processes. This view is widespread in lay and professional circles, and – be it in rather more sophisticated versions – drives official “integration” policies in several countries across the world, including aspects such as language testing in immigration procedures (see Silverstein 1996, 1998 for seminal discussions). This view has for years come under heavy fire from sociolinguists exposing both the inaccuracy of the view and its potential for miscarriages of justice (e.g. Maryns 2005; Blommaert 2009; Jacquemet 2015; Spotti 2016; Khan 2017).

In this paper, we intend to extend this sociolinguistic critique towards the theoretical level, using an assumption which hardly any sociologist of the Grand Tradition from Simmel to Giddens and Bourdieu has ever challenged: that interaction defines whatever we understand by being social, and that all real social relationships are grounded in social interaction. This assumption underlies and motivates the very existence of sociolinguistics (cf. Williams 1992). But in spite of this, sociolinguists have rarely attempted to draw sociological-theoretical statements from their analyses, even when such analyses offered profound revisions of existing mainstream theory interaction (cf. Blommaert 2018 for an elaborate discussion). Integration – a key concept in the sociological tradition – is a case in point.

We shall first describe the theoretical field in which our intervention should be situated: the highly schematic and linear imagination of “integration” in the Grand Tradition, certainly in the work of Parsons; and the sociolinguistic-interactional perspective we can use in our critique of that imagined integration. Next, we shall present and discuss two empirical cases revealing, we suggest, actual processes and patterns of integration in the lives of contemporary diasporic subjects. We shall conclude by pointing towards the manifest advantages of the sociolinguistic perspective we apply here in re-theorizing the structures of contemporary societies, and underscore its pertinence.

From Parsons to Garfinkel

As our opening example showed, integration continues to be used as a keyword to describe the processes by means of which “outsiders” – immigrants, usually – need to “become part” of their “host society”. We 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 consistently been a central sociological concept in the Durkheim-Parsons tradition, and it was the central theme in much of Talcott Parsons’ work. Parsons’ sociology, as we know, focused on integration at the level of “society” (e.g. Parsons 1937, 2007). 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. A society, in the views of Parsons and his followers, 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).

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”. What is expected from such immigrants (and researched about them) are “integrative” processes often labeled as “adjustment” or “acculturation” (e.g. Brown et al 2013). Immigrants, thus, enter processes of change, while the “host society”, “mainstream society” or “receiving culture”, so it appears, remain unaffected and stable. The profound influence of Parsons’ framework is evident here, at two levels at least: (1) processes of integration are primarily attitudinal, a matter of degrees of sharing of the prevailing values of society; (2) the

“society” he imagined does not change, even if challenged by highly deviant subcultural social groups harboring profoundly different norms. 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).²

“Integration”, thus, is a simple and linear movement performed by people (individuals or groups) who are presently *outside*; by means of integration, they will *enter* and become part of what is often described as “mainstream society” – the kind of society which Parsons saw as enduringly tied together by common values. Graphically, the conceptual structure of “integration” can be represented as such: (Figure 2)

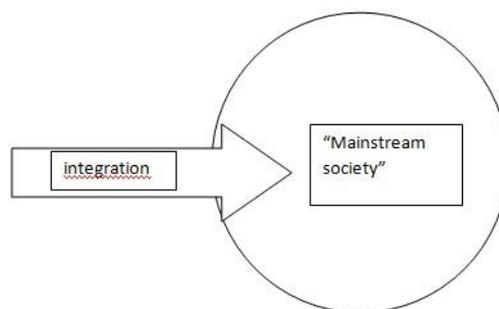


Figure 2: the conceptual structure of “integration”

²Needless 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).

Over 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 rely on the monolithic and static Parsonian imagination. The core of the problem lies in something that Gregory Bateson (1958, 1972) repeatedly observed: in social sciences and humanities we tend to focus on individuals and groups rather than on the relationships and processes that actually form them and make them socially, culturally and politically meaningful, the things for which Simmel used the shorthand “sociation” (a term he much preferred over its result, “society”: Simmel 1950: 9). In other words – and we return to an earlier observation here – there is a widespread neglect of the fundamentally interactional nature of what is social, of the actual, small-scale interactional processes that underpin whatever generalization we attempt to make about society and its populations.

Scholars such as Cicourel (1973), Goffman (e.g. 1974), Strauss (1993) and Garfinkel (2002), all focusing on the concrete features and situated nature of performed social action, pointed to this fatal flaw in mainstream sociology long ago. Contemporary sociolinguistics can provide approaches and arguments now that make these earlier calls compelling and inevitable: as a post-WW2 discipline aimed at understanding society through the lens of language, social interaction is, simply put, its bread and butter.³ Sociolinguistics can offer a simple four-step methodological program for empirical investigations into groups of any kind and configuration, starting from safe ground: the empirical observation of actual modes of interaction. Here it is:

1. Patterns of communication necessarily involve meaningful social relationships as prerequisite, conduit and outcome;
2. Such relationships will always, similarly, involve identities and categorizations, interactionally established;
3. Thus, when observing patterns of communication, we are observing the very essence of sociation and “groupness” – regardless of how we call the groups.
4. And specific patterns of interaction shape specific forms of groups.

³ It will be clear that we are ourselves inclined towards the ethnographic tendency within sociolinguistics. Yet, the statement here can be made categorically and programmatically, and pertains to variously labeled subdisciplines devoted to this general program.

In this sociolinguistic frame, thus, we approach groups pragmatically and axiologically, from the angle of the actual observable communication practices that, eventually, characterize them through the values attributed to such practices – very much a strategy developed (in a radical form) by Harold Garfinkel (2002). Groups, then, are not *a priori* collections of human beings but patterned sets of communicative behaviors and the relationships with which they are dialectically related. Whenever we see such ordered forms of communicative behavior, there is an assumption of active and evolving groupness – sociation – but the analytical issue is not the nature of the group (or the label we need to choose for it) but the specific social relationships observable through and in. All other aspects of sociation can be related to this. A group, thus, is defined as a communicatively organized and ratified set of social relationships. These social relationships will establish the nature of the group as well as the specific ways of attachment to it displayed by individuals – their membership of groups and, by extension, their “integration” into such groups.

We do not expect this interaction-based perspective to raise much controversy. It has its feet firmly in an empirical tradition of social research in which social facts are seen as *interpreted* and *experienced*, strongly dependent on and conditioned by the actual modes of performed social interaction leading to such interpretations and experiences. The subtitle of Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*, recall, was “an essay on the organization of experience”, and later classics of sociolinguistics – think of Gumperz (1982) or Rampton (2006) – all subscribe to it. What we do here, following (but mitigating) Garfinkel’s (2002) example, is to “peel off” most of the social-theoretical assumptions often tacitly taken on board in research, and put them up for reconstruction through a long and hard look at concrete instances of communicative practice.

In what follows we shall draw on this interaction-centered perspective and propose that new modes of diasporic social life, now conditioned by access to new forms of mediated communication enabling new modes of interaction, do indeed result in new modes of integration. To formulate this as a theoretical proposition: *people are 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 between the modes of integration expected in each of them.*

New modes of integration

Recall what C. Wright Mills claimed: that historical changes can and will change the modes of integration in societies. One quite undeniable historical change could be observed over the past two decades: the phenomenal development, growth and distribution of new infrastructures for mobile and online communication, reshuffling the communicative, cultural and knowledge economies worldwide and affecting the conditions of social life in a very broad sense (cf. Appadurai 1996; Castells 1996). Here, thus, we have a form of historical change which has effectively and explicitly to do with reorganized conditions and opportunities for *social interaction*. The change is massive and profound; its effects on modes of integration should be hard to disqualify or dismiss as superficial.

Such effects are, we believe, general. But in line with the more specific point about immigrants and their integration challenges, we shall look at the ways in which these changes have affected the lives of subjects in diasporic situations. It is well known – and already anticipated by Appadurai (1996) – that diaspora subjects do use new communication technologies to their benefit (see e.g. Tall 2004). In view of that, Jelke Brandehof (2014) 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. Figure 3 is a graphic representation of the results for one male respondent, whom we shall nickname Sainge (Brandehof 2014: 38).

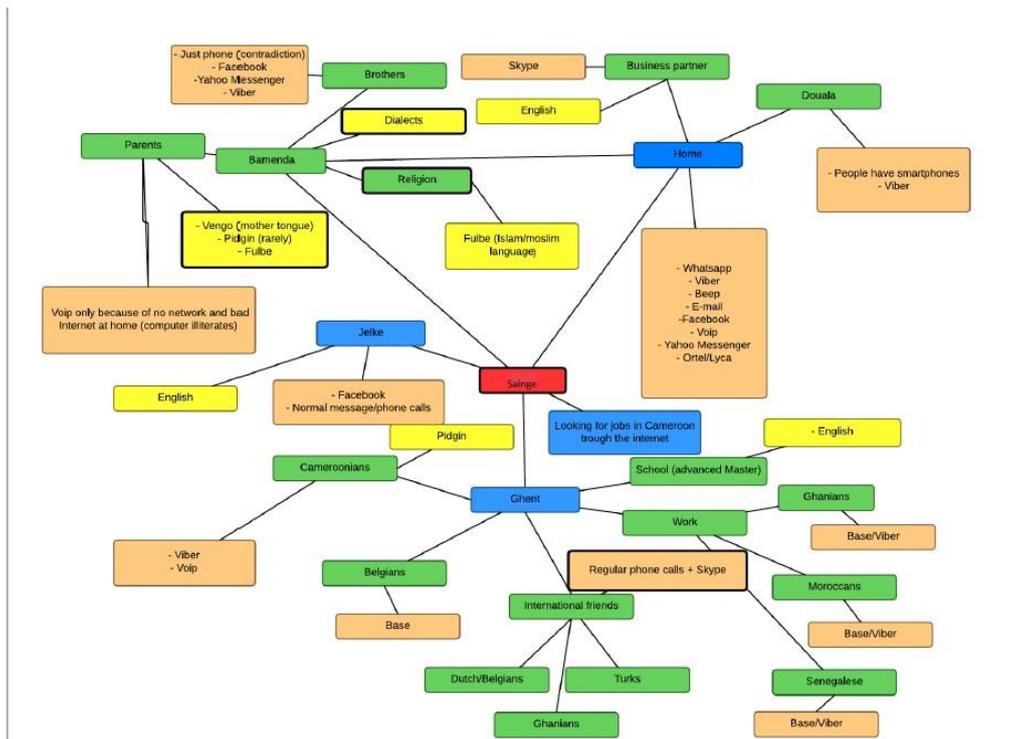


Figure 3: Sainge's communication network.

Courtesy Jelke Brandehof

This figure, we would suggest, represents the empirical side of integration – *real* forms of integration in contemporary diaspora situations. Let us elaborate this.

The figure, no doubt, looks extraordinarily complex; yet there is a tremendous amount of order and nonrandomness to it. We see that Sainge 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, Yahoo Messenger, different VOIP systems, Whatsapp and so forth, and free call signals known as “beeps”. 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 local physical, economic and social environment in Ghent, his home environment in Cameroon, and the virtual environment of the labor market in Cameroon. In terms of activities, he maintains contacts revolving around his studies, maintaining social and professional networks in Ghent, job hunting on the Internet, and an intricate range of family and business activities back in Cameroon. Each of these activities – here is 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.

As mentioned earlier, specific forms of interaction assume specific forms of sharedness and shape specific forms of groups. Our subject is integrated, through the organized use of these communication resources, in several groups situated in very different zones of social life. 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 we 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. And 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 groups, both “thick” and “light” ones, is *necessary*. The social world of any contemporary human being is by default *polycentric*. Sainge 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 zones, however, should not lead us to suggest that the *degrees* of integration would be similar. Put in a more theoretical vocabulary, a polycentric social universe is not composed of *equivalent* groups and social arenas: some are more enduring than others, some have a more profound impact than others on the life trajectories of subjects, some affect more aspects of social life than others, some demand more profound levels of involvement than others. Modes of integration, consequently, will differ across the different units we observe. We can assume that Sainge 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. And we can assume that he was, at the time of our research, more profoundly integrated in the Ghent academic laboratory culture in which he performs his doctoral work, than in the Cameroonian business world in which he aspires to find his place in the future.

We observe exactly the same phenomena and patterns in the case of a young Tajik man, whose communication economy was investigated by Monika Nemcova (2015). Coming from the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 24-year old Bobby (as we call him) spent the first 15 years of his life in this city. Although he spoke Tajik with his parents, he went to a Russian-medium school. In the last year of his curriculum there, he was selected for a program which enabled him to study at an American high school and live with an American family for one year. After coming back to Dushanbe and graduating from high school, he went on to study at Tajik Agrarian University. Later, his family moved to Ankara, Turkey. Bobby followed them to the country, but chose Istanbul for his subsequent studies. After finishing there, he decided to do his Master's degree in The Netherlands, where he resided at the time of our interviews with him. Apart from Tajik and Russian, Bobby speaks and understands several other languages with varying proficiency. These are English, Turkish, Persian/Farsi, Arabic, French and Chinese. His relatives and friends live in various countries and to keep in touch with them, Bobby employs diverse applications, specifically Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, Viber, Line, Instagram and V Kontakte. Figure 4 shows us the structure of Bobby's network: (Nemcova 2015: 25)

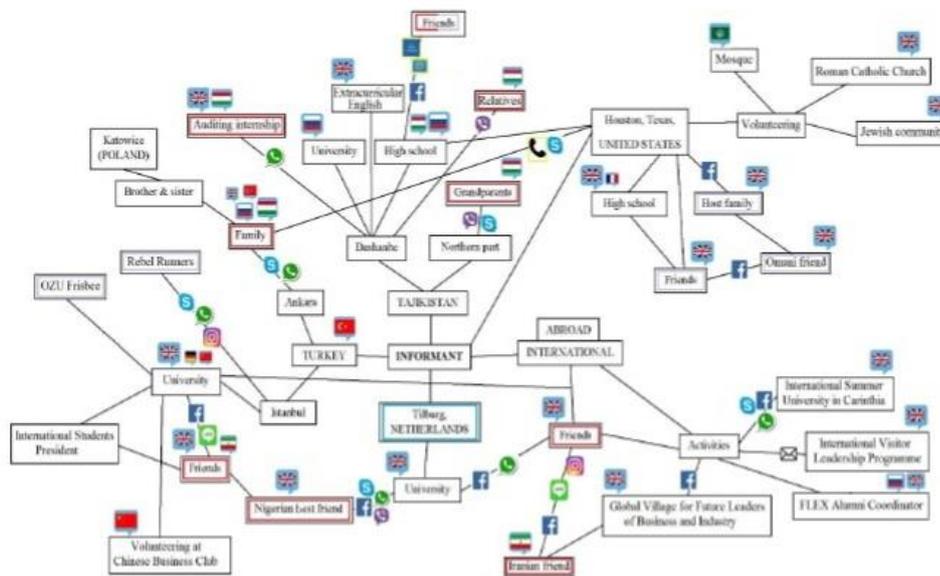


Figure 4: Bobby's communicative network.

Courtesy Monika Nemcova.

We have seen Bobby's complex migration trajectory, taking him from Tajikistan to the United States, back to Tajikistan, onwards to Turkey and finally to the Netherlands. His family, specifically his grandmother, uncle and cousins, live in Tajikistan, while his nuclear family has moved to Turkey. Furthermore, he occasionally keeps in touch with his American host family and friends he met there. He has been participating in several international programs and conferences, which has led to further diversification of his network. And obviously, he must maintain dense patterns of interaction with fellow students and staff in the Dutch university where he does his graduate work, and also maintains loose ties with a broader social network there. Like Sainge, Bobby does *not* spend his life in one place and in one community; his social activities and relationships are dispersed over various places, are of

a very different nature when compared to each other, and require different specific modes of interaction in order to be sustained.

We emphasized that our subjects have to remain integrated across these different social arenas – *sufficiently* integrated, not “completely” integrated. And the technologies for cheap and intensive long-distance communication enable them 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. In short, here is a textbook example of Castells’s network society (1996). 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 members do 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 a nomadic lifestyle by elite travelers, it is seen as a positive thing by these other migrants, facilitating a more rewarding and harmonious lifestyle that does not involve painful ruptures of existing social bonds, social roles, activity patterns and identities.

Integrating the sociolinguistic perspective

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 grounded in a deeply flawed, unrealistic imagination of society and its populations. If we return to the cases of Sainge and Bobby we can, for instance, ask where the “mainstream” of the “host society” can be found? Is that host society, in Bobby’s case, Turkey? The US? The Netherlands? And turning to Sainge, would we be ready to accept the university laboratory and its community, into which Sainge was rather smoothly integrated, as some kind of “mainstream” in Flemish-Belgian society? Given that the lingua franca in that laboratory is English, not Dutch, it is doubtful (certainly for the Flemish nationalist MP we quoted at the outset). What we observed in both cases does not fit the conceptual scheme presented in Figure 2: there are multiple “host societies”; there is no real rupture between the local “host society” and the translocal societies of “origin” since all these arenas form part of the social world of our subjects; and within each of these societies, our subjects were part, to different degrees of intensity, of *specific* communities. The “mainstream”, we can see, is hardly a realistic sociological unit.

What this small exercise demonstrates, we hope, is the theoretical potential, largely untapped, of the study of language in society for understanding *society*, and not just language. The relevance of such work for critically questioning the foundations of our thinking about societies and the people inhabiting them is tremendous, certainly at a time when the biggest forces of change in these societies are new and rapidly developing technologies for social interaction – the internet and its mobile applications. The neglect of language as a topic of detailed inquiry in sociology (and, by association, in social theory) is old and persistent.

Herbert Blumer, in 1969, lamented:

“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.” (1969: 7)

Consequently, there is a continuous risk of anachronisms in our fundamental assumptions about society and people, many of which were developed in an era in which the architects of such theoretical assumptions transferred handwritten texts to people called “typists”, who used a specialized skill called “keyboard writing” on a machine called a “typewriter”. If it is our aim to understand society, and perhaps even to contribute to its improvements, we can no longer afford to overlook language as a source of fundamental and generalizable insights, as a

source of social theory, of relevance to all those who use language. That is: to all human beings.

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