

## **Superdiversity, language and society: issues on the move. An interview with Prof. Jan Blommaert and Dr. Massimiliano Spotti (Tilburg University)**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary societies are strongly marked by a new complex web of relations, regulations and practices much as a response to new globalization processes along with the advent of digital media technologies. Human mobility, in particular, becomes a key element in the understanding of recent times as it has brought an unprecedented diversification of diversity that came to be known as superdiversity. As languages are a fundamental element in human relations, the emerging complexities in social interactions are to be taken into account in current research on meaning making processes in both online-offline communication. In this interview, Jan Blommaert and Massimiliano Spotti, from Tilburg University, the Netherlands, provide us with an acute analysis on the trajectories of Sociolinguistics. By claiming in favor of a paradigm shift in which language research would have to consider elements hitherto neglected by traditional language research, the authors' pioneering publications and local initiatives open up the terrain for the reinvention of language studies, policies, and practices.

### **Keywords**

Superdiversity – Sociolinguistics – Language – Mobility – Online communication – Offline communication.

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## Introduction

Contemporary societies have been strongly marked by a new complex web of relations, regulations and practices much as a response to new globalization processes along with the advent of digital media technologies. Mobility of goods, information and, in particular, human beings (SPOTTI, 2018) becomes a key element in the understanding of recent times as it has brought an unprecedented and transformative diversification of diversity that came to be known as superdiversity (VERTOVEC, 2007). Under this concept, new variables beyond ethnicity and territorialization are to be taken into account in the exercise of understanding the constitutive multilayered identities of the migrant subject. Consequently, founding principles and theoretical concepts such as language, communication, and community within the realms of Sociolinguistics are to be put under scrutiny in a way that language research truly moves beyond the confines of monolithic and stabilized assumptions. Professor Jan Blommaert is, undoubtedly, one of the most respected contemporary scholars that has contributed substantially to such endeavor as his body of research has brought up a fresh perspective on the very boundaries of Sociolinguistics vis-à-vis the complexities of today's superdiverse societies.

Blommaert is known as one of the world's most important sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists. Currently, he is Professor of Language, Culture and Globalization and Director of the Babylon Center at Tilburg University, The Netherlands, and Professor of African Linguistics and Sociolinguistics at Ghent University, Belgium. Inspired by linguists such as Hymes, Gumperz, and Silverstein, Blommaert has published widely on language ideologies, discourse analysis, issues of power and its implications to language, as well as literacy studies. Over the last years, his publications have highly contributed to a paradigm shift as they propose to target in a coordinated set of actions so that the new uses of language might be better grasped in light of superdiversity (BLOMMAERT; RAMPTON, 2011). In his significant book *The sociolinguistics of globalization* (BLOMMAERT, 2010), the author expands the way earlier works on Sociolinguistics had tackled language studies by addressing them under more real-life, ethnographic lenses in which local interactions are examined within conditions of globalization. One of the major contributions from this book is his harsh criticism against reified views of languages as entities which, then, turn out to engender a pernicious notion of "languages in competition". Needless to say is Blommaert's non-romanticized and non-celebratory perspective whatsoever on globalization, as he acutely acknowledges the relation between social inequality and people's language resources and repertoires.

Among the conceptual developments brought by Blommaert, it is worth to highlight his revisited discussion on repertoire (BLOMMAERT; BACKUS, 2012). In earlier sociolinguistic studies, the notion of repertoire was tied to the triad linguistic resources, knowledge about the language (correspondent to the chomskyan idea of competence) and speech community, the three of them being understood as stable constructs. Blommaert's revisited notion of repertoire in light of superdiversity deals with a more fluid understanding of language, learning and community, in which both formal and non-formal learning environments are acknowledged. As people move across different

networks and communities and as they encounter different semiotic modes in their meaning making processes, repertoires turn to be less attached to a supposedly homogenous and permanent “community” and more related to our life trajectories and subjectivities. By understanding repertoires as indexical biographies, Blommaert refuses homogeneity and fixity as he legitimates more fluid and dynamic uses of language, be them the result of a comprehensive or specialized mode of learning, or the temporary encounters with languages one might have throughout a lifetime.

The fluidity and dynamics are even more present when one considers the new interactions made possible by digital technologies. This is one of Blommaert’s most recent research interests: to conduct investigations on the relation between language, mobility, and society. Once again, mobility plays a fundamental role and is in tune with Blommaert’s discussion on language repertoires, corroborating his main argument towards a Sociolinguistics of resources as an emergent paradigm. If traditional Sociolinguistics has long conceived of languages as systems as well as paid greater emphasis on synchronic contexts and face-to-face communication, an emerging Sociolinguistics would account for language as social practice along with a new emphasis on complex contexts and online communication (BLOMMAERT, 2017).

In this sense, Blommaert, along with other scholars, claims that if one wishes to understand the complexities behind contemporary discursive practices, be them in online or offline contexts, one has to dig into a new ethnographic-oriented field research which enables the researcher to grasp the very complexity of socio-communicative situations once neglected by Sociolinguistics. This would imply: (i) going beyond the linguistic realm and acknowledging a variety of semiotic modes; (ii) questioning regimes of knowledge in relation to its production, distribution, sources, technologies; (iii) reframing the nature of interaction as simply a real-time, face-to-face social activity (BLOMMAERT; SPOTTI; VAN DER AA, 2018).

In other words, what has been proposed by Blommaert, Spotti and Van der Aa (2018) is the reframing of what has been traditionally called “text” and “context” so that the former is no longer assumed as the priority aspect in meaning making processes. Context does matter. And it matters considerably in today’s mobile societies, so that language studies can no longer take it as mere text clarification element. By placing the context at the heart of communicative practices, the new sociolinguist faces somehow a dilemma: the acknowledgement of a multiplicity of semiotic modes to the detriment of language as the *par excellence* object of study. In this sense, contemporary Sociolinguistics has to become less “linguistic” and more multimodal/multisemiotic in order to maintain its relevance as a science.

Understanding online-offline communication, social media, and digital culture is, indeed, part of Blommaert’s most recent research projects. By taking the premise that digital culture not only reshapes the world we live in, but also reshapes political life and the social sciences, the scholar emphasizes the relationship between language studies and social media. Retrieving foucauldian thought, some of Blommaert’s arguments deal with the understanding of social media as a new, powerful panopticum along with the need to critically question the algorithmic driving forces behind the digital culture wars.

An example of this phenomenon is today's transformative online and offline rhetorical world of politics. In his analysis of Donald Trump's tweets, Blommaert (2018) claims that out of this new genre emerges a new format of public broadcasting that defies the very boundaries of the oral and the written, the public and the private through a clever, yet dangerous new *vox populism*. What is quite innovative in Blommaert's work is that it sheds light to these new online-offline discursive appropriations so that political and ideological interests are unveiled, going beyond mere textual element analysis.

Examining the theoretical foundations of language studies as well as the implications for social life *vis-à-vis* mobility and digitalization of recent times is also Dr. Massimiliano Spotti's research interest.

Spotti is Assistant Professor at the Department of Cultural Studies and deputy director of Babylon, Centre for the Study of Superdiversity at the Faculty of Humanities and Digital Sciences at Tilburg University, The Netherlands. He is also fellow of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Meertens Institute (Language Variation Unit) and Member of the Council of the Dutch Language Union with the specific task of advising the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science on matters related to Dutch language, Integration and Asylum Seekers.

In a broad sense, Spotti's work involves investigations on language, identity, and citizenship in face of mobility and superdiversity. He departs from a critique on conventional language studies as we might see in the prominent *The Oxford handbook of language and society* (2017), edited along with Ofelia García and Nelson Flores, in which the interdisciplinary nature of sociolinguistics is reclaimed as well as the need for examining the intertwined relation between language and society. In doing so, they claim for a critical poststructuralist sociolinguistics as it challenges a bounded, crystal-clear notion of language. In order to disinvent the so-called "named languages" (MAKONI; PENNYCOOK, 2006), language research has shifted its terminology, moving from first theorizations on bilingualism to multilingualism and, more recently, to languaging (SPOTTI; BLOMMAERT, 2017). This explains the emergence of new terms within the field (PENNYCOOK, 2016), including translanguaging (GARCÍA; LI WEI, 2014), translingual practices (CANAGARAJAH, 2017), metrolanguaging (OTSUJI; PENNYCOOK, 2010), and polylinguaging (JØRGENSEN et al., 2011) to name a few. Regardless of their epistemological differences and the criticisms evolving from this plethora of new terms (PENNYCOOK, 2016; MAKONI, 2012), they do seem to share a positive common ground as they all attempt to move away from stabilized monolingual/bilingual orientations and even from multilingualism theorizations – especially those aligned with neoliberal agendas (CANAGARAJAH, 2017). In this particular handbook, Spotti and collaborators claim in favor of translanguaging, defined as the speaker's complex and active use of a repertoire of linguistic features (GARCÍA; LI WEI, 2014). What matters most in such concept, particularly for those willing to investigate how languages operate among migrants, is the legitimacy of the very heteroglot nature of language in social interactions. In other words, if mixed and hybrid uses of languages were once assumed by traditional Linguistics as an exception or deficiency, they should now be taken as default.

The argument becomes even more compelling if one considers the juxtaposed multiple semiotic modes in meaning-making processes made possible in digital media, what would call for a shift from linguistic repertoire to semiotic repertoire (KUSTERS et al., 2017). As Spotti and Blommaert (2017) claim, technological devices, identity repertoires, and transnational communication in current social media channels offer new challenges as they have become highly multimodal, defying standard assumptions within the language field.

If on one hand human mobility might encompass positive experiences marked by interconnectivity, transnational employment and international student mobility as opportunities for widening exchanges and repertoires, on the other hand, the dark side of globalization is also present as we witness a kind of mobility founded on social inequalities attested in today's escalating growth of large scale displacement and forced migration (GOODWIN, 2010). And this is exactly the kind of social interaction that has been of most interest in Spotti's recent production, that is, understanding the sociolinguistic regimes behind highly complex and heterogeneous contexts as it is the case of asylum seeking centers. What makes Spotti's work pioneering and relevant is actually the fact that it enables us to see the migrant/refugee under the prism of possibility to the detriment of the vicious imaginary of the migrant as a deficient and melancholic body, who would be solely responsible for his/her own social integration. (AHMED, 2007). In his ethnographic study on asylum-seeking centers in Belgium, Spotti (2019) finds out that behind the disqualified, pre-assumed "migrant subject in need" by the native speaker teacher offering Dutch classes lies an agentive and creative capacity from those migrant subjects as they build a genuine conviviality thanks to a mobile phone, which turns out to be the small gadget from which all affective experiences emerge. "In which language?", a linguist might ask. Concerns of this kind don't seem to suffice any longer. What contemporary linguists need in the endeavors of unveiling the constitutive elements made present in today's social interactions is a more holistic pair of lenses that defy the short-sighted binaries still present in science: theory and practice, cognition and emotion, reason and spirituality, certainty and contingency, objectivity and subjectivity.

Readers might wonder which educational practices and policies could better inform the complexities addressed by scholars such as Blommaert and Spotti, in particular, those related to language education. With regards to education in multilingual contexts, Spotti and Kroon (2016) bring a critique on what they call the teacher's "trained blindness". As mobility has turned the circulations of language in multilingual schools even more complex, the authors question to what extent the still-ingrained monolithic assumptions of language, culture, and identity reveal a trained blindness from the part of educational professionals as they struggle to equate superdiversity and normativity. The authors advocate in favor of truly paying attention to the rich language encounters that emerge out of these multilingual contexts, in particular, the creative meaning making processes in the ways students use languages and other semiotic resources across formal and non-formal educational spaces. The authors claim for the need of teacher education programs which could deconstruct student teachers' monolingual mindsets as a pre-condition to an educational model that would better respond to superdiversity. As for language

policies, Spotti, Kroon and Li (2019) see an abyss between top-down policies and bottom-up practices where 'new speakers' have been neglected by a still-ingrained monolingual orientation. In view of this, language policies do need to review their purposefulness in light of these new identities.

Along with all this solid body of knowledge built upon their theorizations over the last decades, it is worth to mention some of Blommaert's and Spotti's involvement in very recent initiatives that surely pay justice to the very argument posed by the writers, that is, if language studies wish to be relevant vis-à-vis the emerging complexities and challenges of interaction in today's society, then it is high time that this realm of knowledge truly committed itself to real-life communicative situations. This would imply breaking with a polarized view of theory and practice as well as fostering open spaces so that knowledge could be collaboratively constructed as well as distributed more easily and democratically. Babylon, the Center for the Study of Superdiversity<sup>2</sup> is one of these initiatives. Having Blommaert and Spotti as director and deputy director respectively, the Research Center aims at fostering interdisciplinary, collaborative research on several issues with regards to the changing nature of communities, identities, social interactions and learning experiences in online-offline worlds.

Likewise, the project *DiggIt Magazine*<sup>3</sup> deserves attention for its very constitutive epistemologies. DiggIt Magazine is an online community-driven academic news and information platform as part of two courses taught at Tilburg University, hence its two folded purpose as it functions as a learning instrument and an interactive magazine. What is very interesting about this project, with which Blommaert and Spotti are both strongly involved, is its intent to break with a conventional epistemology that is still marked by verticalization, concentration and normativity. By fostering the notion of distributed and democratic knowledge under an epistemology of performance (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2003), and, mostly, by acknowledging the student' authorship, this initiative echoes, in practical terms, some of the concerns addressed before, that is to say, in order to better grasp the new meaning making processes in new social media interactions, contemporary scholars must dig for new answers and communicative strategies. And, in doing so, they would have to consider the specificities of the local in relation to the global. In this respect, the reinvention of Sociolinguistics seems to rely on our own reinventions as language researchers, professors, and advisors so that our certainties are constantly put at stake in new investigative journeys.

In this interview, we ask Jan Blommaert and Massimiliano Spotti to reflect on the future of language studies in light of superdiversity and mobility. By bringing a genealogical perspective to sociolinguistic studies, the authors do acknowledge previous contributions within the field, but stress out the urgent need to revisit our way of doing research on language and communication. The interview was conducted at the Babylon

**2-** <https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/research/institutes-and-research-groups/babylon>

**3-** <https://www.diggitmazine.com/>

Center by the time one of the authors (Duboc) attended the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Multicultural Discourses, from October 23-25, 2018, at Tilburg University.<sup>4</sup>

## Interview



Source: Blommaert: Maurice van de Bosch (2018).



Source: Spotti- personal archive.

Jan Blommaert and Massimiliano Spotti, thank you very much for agreeing with this interview. There has been a renewed debate in contemporary linguistics thanks to contributions like yours. We now witness a mushrooming of new terminologies in the field of language studies, such as translanguaging, metrolanguaging, polylinguaging and so forth. Would you tell us how you see this evolving movement in your own academic trajectories? How have your own understandings of language, communication, superdiversity and society altered throughout time?

**MS:** One of the things that I see is that, indeed, as you addressed here in your question, there has been a mushrooming of terms coming up. Some people would call it a pop-up store of sociolinguistics. But mushrooming is ever so negative if you think in those terms. What it shows is that there is a severe challenge for people working in the field of sociolinguistics and applied linguistics. Recently I have been to the LESLLA Conference in Palermo, the second language education conference for adult learners. There, too, we see that L2 research is coming to grip with how it approached L2 learning before globalization and L2 learning after globalization.

**4-** The participation on the Conference was funded by the Santander Mobility Program Call (PRPG04/2018).

As explained and embodied in Blommaert's *The sociolinguistics of globalization* (2010) as well as in my more recent work (FLORES; SPOTTI; GARCÍA, 2017), this does not mean that if a discipline is coming to grip with its shortcomings or better with new phenomena, that it is a falling apart discipline. Rather, it means that there is a need for new metaphors, for new terminologies, new theoretical hooks. And, in my view, what we see happening is actually sociolinguistics trying to grasp these new entities and new things that are cropping up in the study of language *in* society and through that can serve as an explanation for the ideological, socio-political and socio-cultural aspects of how language *and* society work together.

JB: In my case I have been swept up in movements and one of the things I very often try to point out to people asking where I come from is: I show them this book *Code-switching in conversation*. It was edited by Peter Auer in 1998 but it goes back to a workshop in 1994 in Germany. If you recall in the early 90s the study of code-switching was basically still the study of "abnormal" forms of language. Weird. You had these people who refused to use one language and had to try to come to terms with multiple languages. This was heavily abnormalized, and what happened during that particular meeting in Germany was the normalization of code-switching. So, right from the start we all assumed: there is nothing abnormal about code-switching. It was that moment, I think, that is important. If you look in this book you will see that several of the individuals who are now involved in the study of what we call sociolinguistic superdiversity are here. And it started there. It started with a recognition of the stuff that we, from an old-style linguistic and sociolinguistic viewpoint, believed were exceptional or abnormal or required special explanation were actually so widespread that they should be the default. And I think that is where it started. Another thing in my own case that was very important was that, at more or less the same moment, we got swept up in the movement around language ideologies. So, there was another revolution, a theoretical revolution if you wish, in linguistic anthropology and beyond. In the late 1990s, many of us were in a new position, a position in which we could say that language had to be looked at not from an idea of purity and closeness but from an idea of impurity, if you wish, of blending, mixing dynamics, change and so on, as a default while the pure and standardized variety was assumed as an exceptional one. And now we had a new range of instruments to address it, and this allowed us to move on to what I still believe is a paradigmatic change, towards a view of sociolinguistic reality as organized, driven, structured in entirely different ways from what was on the books before. So, in my case I was being swept up in these movements, jointly with all these amazing individuals like Ben Rampton and a couple of others, who, then, jointly decided to have a really long and hard look at it. And it was very productive. These new words that came out are all from that era, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, being approximately 15 years old. Translanguaging, for instance. And they all mark exactly the search for a vocabulary that was not there. So, from the perspective of this new phenomenology, if you wish, we started looking at language in a very different way, using very different instruments that now needed names. There had to be the creation of vocabulary. That is why you have this escalation and it is not over yet.



**MS:** It is absolutely not over because on top of it, if we look at the chronicles of sociolinguistics in the past four decades, if you want to call it that way, one of its biggest challenges, right now, is the online world in which we all live in and its repercussions on people's offline lives. We are faced with even steadier flocks of movement, that is, movement is a part and parcel of our human condition, even if we were to be glued to a desk into our study room. We browse, we move, we mingle, we interact, we disappear, we lurk, we see, we watch or simply we look. Who is the over hearer of our online conversations today? Who is the over reader of our conversations today? Take the case of asylum seekers in Lampedusa from being military strategic during NATO times, which can now really be called as the living room of globalization or even the waiting room of globalization. All sorts of things happen there, in terms of identities, hybridities, movement and reshaping of society. All this is also rendered as even more complex by online environments. This is the great challenge of sociolinguistics entering the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is a great wealth of societal processes still to be unraveled.

**You both have addressed such mushrooming of new terminologies as a positive phenomenon in the field of language studies. In this respect, Pennycook (2016) presents his own critique on certain terminologies but also acknowledges this need of reinvention and revisitation of concepts. Pavlenko (2018), in turn, brings a harsh argument against the term superdiversity per se. As your research has brought superdiversity to the fore within the realm of contemporary Sociolinguistics, how would you respond to such criticism?**

**JB:** Well, the first observation is: I never worry over words. It is the ideas they stand for. Now, the ideas refer exactly to that new reality I mentioned earlier. And that reality is fundamentally new, in two ways. First, we live in an online-offline environment now. And if you look at our worlds of communication, those who say that there is nothing new usually say so online, in electronic journals and on social media. And they don't realize the big contradiction that is there: we never had that sociolinguistic infrastructure before. So even if stuff looks more or less the same as stuff from the 18th century or the 19th century or whenever, the sociolinguistic environment and infrastructure within which we now communicate have fundamentally changed. That is an ontological innovation and we need new words for it, because different words enable us to see different things. The second way in which it is new is: we are aware of it, of this new ontology. And here is the value of superdiversity. It became a lens, enabling us to look beyond those traditional boundaries of language, not only language but also identities, groups and so on, all these assumptions we had about language as being the point of departure for any sociolinguist. We now start looking at what is within language, inside language. It has become a reflex, a sort of a knee-jerk reaction we all have. I have already mentioned code-switching as the point of departure for myself and others. Now, if you go to the work of Ben Rampton, you will notice that what he has broken down this notion of code-switching into a range of very different things and all of them are important. We're looking at the nanostructure of code-switching now. Those are the ideas for which I am ready to fight. Whether you

want to call them superdiversity, I do not care; whether you want to call it languaging or metrolingualism, I do not give a damn. I will never spill blood over the value of a word and if individuals are allergic to words, let them use different ones. But it is the ideas behind it that matter.

**MS:** This point that you have just raised also picks up on another issue that is very dear to me, that is the idea of speech community, of group, of network building on the example of a speaker himself, building on the example that you gave of a classroom. If I think of the work I was doing in 2007 by looking at the construction of immigrant minority pupils' identities in primary school classrooms in the Netherlands and in Flanders, I would be confronted with a totally different story right now. If I compare those classrooms with what I would see right now because of mobile phones and of socio-technological platforms where reality of teenagers becomes augmented by online environments, one would seem that the classroom has lost authority as the unit of analysis for identity construction. One would also see that the process of learning, in the classical, formal, catechistic sense has deeply changed. So the question now is, what is learning in contemporary global societies? Here I am referring not only to the official online environments in which classrooms are being set up, rather I am taking the classrooms here as spaces that also have an educational online environment, as youngsters – and students more in general of whichever age and of whichever educational level – open the classroom wall with their online activities. Take the case of group work that, for instance, has been deeply studied by the Santa Barbara Discourse Group in the 70s in the US. Nowadays, a group of that kind would let a different image of group work come through. So when we nowadays study group work – and whether we can still talk about groups would need an interview on its own – we are going to be studying the group work that learners construct there and then. We need to be very well aware of the fact that those learners are at the same time chatting across networks, where these networks are overlapping networks, both within the school and outside, both online and offline. How does that contribute to learning? Do these learners game? Do they mock around? And when they do so, what happens in terms of learning and in terms of identity construction? So, can we really talk about groups again? Or do we talk about networks? And do the rules and the boundaries that define groups in social sciences, as well as in sociolinguistics, when we think about speech community, do they still apply to these networks? Or should we start, in the fashion of James Paul Gee's work, talking about affinity groups or networks? But then again what are the new parameters for these networks? This has massive consequences if we think of formal environments where learning is taking place. It has massive consequences in terms of informal and non-formal learning.

**JB:** And just to follow up on this example: it raises issues about very fundamental things. For instance, we are now working on situations that are influenced by actors that are not here, that are not immediately involved in the observable actions. You begin to see the methodological implications of that. But also theoretically, what is the local, the idea of the local in sociolinguistics now or in any form of analysis, knowing that all sorts of

non-local influences, resources and instruments *do* affect the local? The same goes for the subject: who is performing the action, knowing that there might be actors that we never see? Just think of the Google algorithms. This is the online–offline nexus which raises all sorts of huge issues of which we always believed that we had a very clear view on. In the analysis of, for instance, interactions in schools, just count the people in the class. There are 41 learners there and one or two teachers, so that is the community we are going to observe. Sorry. No. That is over, because the learners have a smartphone in their bags and the teacher uses a smartboard. So who is there, who is involved in this social action? It is no longer that simple.

**MS:** And the same counts also for key concepts, like the speaker. Who is speaking? If we produce things that we have heard from others, if we are, as Bakhtin says, discourse-reproducing machines, where are those discourses coming from? What are the sources? But also, who is the hearer of what we say? Who is the over-hearer of what we say?

**JB:** Huge problem on social media.

**MS:** Yes, indeed.

Since you brought this important discussion on online communication and the need for language studies to account for that, I would like to know if you have established any dialogue with the recent studies on literacies since they have been discussing similar issues. Gee (2004), for instance, has this notion of affinity groups or affinity spaces. Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have brought an important discussion on the new technical stuff and the new ethos stuff as the new emerging elements in new literacies. Cope and Kalantzis (2000), in turn, have vastly published about the Multiliteracies framework and the need for a Multiliteracies pedagogy that would better respond to the new working, civic, and personal participation in today's society.

**JB:** I actually come from there.

**AD:** Gunther Kress (2000), as well, and his particular contribution to issues on multimodality in new communication and the need to acknowledge new semiotic modes in today's meaning-making processes.

**JB:** Yes. There is a great amount of stuff that we draw directly from the work of Gunther Kress and his associates, notably through the methodological detour, if you wish, of linguistic ethnography. But Gunther's influence is pervasive. Let me illustrate it. Whenever we want to identify somebody sociolinguistically, we ask the question: how many languages do you speak? Speak. Alright? We should be aware that speaking nowadays is not reduced in importance, but it is no longer the default in communicating. A lot of what we do in this online–offline nexus is: we script, we design, we use emojis, we use memes, we use little smileys formed with a dot, a comma, semicolon, and so on, things

we design ourselves. So, we are now involved in a sociolinguistic economy in which overlooking literacy in the broader sense is one of the most fundamental errors, and we have learned that of course from new literacy studies. I think I have written it somewhere what the Internet has done for us: it has made literacy an intrinsic part of mainstream sociolinguistics now. If you disregard it...

**So, sociolinguistics has become less and less linguistics and more related to the study of wider meaning-making processes?**

**JB:** Exactly. It's a symbiosis that we are now addressing and symbiosis using everything we have.

**MS:** Starting from the 1987, with total linguistic fact from Silverstein, which I think is ever so up-to-date at this very moment and it grasps really in depth what is the datum for a science of language.

And what has been the place of social media and the advent of new technologies of information and communication at schools and language policies? Have schools and language policies accounted for a curriculum that would consider the use of digital technologies as an important aspect in a superdiverse society?

**JB:** It is very ambivalent.

That's right. For instance, in Brazil there were laws prohibiting the use of mobiles in schools and, despite more recent revisions by municipal and state legislation, we still witness many contradictions with regards to the very epistemological basis that orient the use of digital technologies with pedagogical purposes, not to mention precarious infrastructure and poor internet performance.

**JB:** In France now as well.

**It is quite contradictory.**

**MS:** On the one hand, if you look at the new guidelines given by the EU, a European person is not anymore solely a trilingual subject, so somebody that speaks a mother tongue, a foreign language and the language of a neighboring country. A European is, ideally, also somebody who is digitally skilled. So, there has been a huge investment in defining what are the digital skills for Europeans – if something like that exists and in which way we should stimulate it. The EU wishes to stimulate all Europeans to be digitally apt to do things in life. That is one side of the story. Then, there is another side of the story that says: my dear newly arrived migrant, if you want to stay, on top of all the requirements that are already set in front of you, you also need to become digitally literate. But then the big question that arises from there is whether this emphasis on the

digital is done for setting a further obstacle on immigrant migrant paths. There seem to be an omnipresent trained blindness on the side of the State and of education that prevents, or better even trains, professionals in not seeing what people already possess, that is, in not seeing the sociolinguistic and socio-educational repertoires and rather having them to follow training for civilization (inburgering) in a sort of blindfolded manner with the idea in mind of one size fits all. Luckily though, with the new minister of integration, things seem to be changing, as we are going back to a more holistic and personal approach to the newly arrived migrant. So we could say that there is a move away from de-humanisation of the migrant, a move that was much awaited, a move that could deliver, in theory, way better results than those that are being scored now.

**JB:** What they already have.

**MS:** Yes. What they already have. So, that is another issue, from there my ambivalence.

**JB:** And in schools, there is a very strong perception of, notably, social media as being anti-learning, the opposite of learning. Not just social media, by the way, but also gaming and things like that. Hence these regulations prohibiting the use of smartphones. Now, of course, there is the aspect that vastly more activities now are being deployed by learners on all sorts of new apps. The big challenge is to realize the importance of those instruments as elements of a learning environment. We have seen that in the case of asylum seekers. They enter places loaded with information which they harvested exclusively online. So, the only thing they have is this: a smartphone. Literally, the only thing they have. But that thing constitutes and enables an immensely profound and effective learning environment for them. We do not nearly take that seriously enough. Excluding online instruments from the classroom while you are assigning homework to children for which they will have to Google, to me that sounds like serious ambivalence.

**MS:** Recently, two weeks ago, I was at the EFNIL Conference - the Conference of European Language Institutes, which is fairly big event as it involves all the European language academies here in Europe. While I was doing my talk I realized that that was the first time that a lot of people that are busy with language politics and language policy heard of the online-offline divide, which is no divide anymore by the way. Rather they still interpret it as a divide. And that is interesting because on the one hand, you have supranational policy agencies that impose on every citizen in Europe the fact that they should be digital, having digital skills. At the same time, though, once you start looking at those organizations at national level that do language policy and through that police people's own language doings, then, you see there is still a lack of the online world being part of their policy concerns. These agencies need to start looking at what happens informally in people's lives and how people learn informally. I mean, we learn hugely when we are not in a class, when we are not in a lecture room and so forth. Actually, and most likely, that is even when we learn the most because it comes out of your own will and not just out of a curriculum whether it is a national curriculum or a school

curriculum. So, those are things that supranational and national policing bodies need to start taking on board more seriously, that is, the informal digital side of learning.

**JB:** Just a footnote: we have a B.A. and an M.A. program on online culture here, the central node of which is an electronic magazine we organized ourselves, the Diggitt Magazine. The idea behind it is: “ok, we can study online culture by producing it. So, do not just listen to us, old people talking about how rapidly stuff is changing. Change it yourself”. The effect we see on our students is amazing. Rather than writing normal seminar papers – the boring kind with introduction, methodology, data and so forth – we demand from them that they write readable articles on a medium which is actually broadcasted to anyone, and, in that sense, also take responsibility for your own voice as an intellectual. And they enjoy it, finding it massively interesting as a learning environment. The bottom line is to try and normalize it, destereotype it, learn to understand this new learning environment. How does it really work? We live with a lot of stereotypes about gaming communities and so on as being a waste of space. So, let’s get into it, let’s first understand it and then see how it can be best used in learning. Because, this object, the smartphone, is the object we manipulate most in a day. There is no other object that we use that much. So, come on, let’s see what sort of huge potential there is. Let’s be selective, let’s be smart, and then see how it can assist people, like asylum seekers or refugees who have no other formal learning opportunity. In many instances, they never had such opportunities. Coming from West Africa or from Somalia, they have never seen the inside of a school. So, let’s use this as their school and let’s use it proactively, let’s use it for what it is: smart. Let’s do something with it.

Well, you brought the issue of immigrants and refugees. Now, Brazilian big cities have been witnessing this increase in the number of multilingual schools due to the new migration movements that are now happening in our country. So, on one hand we have bilingual and international schools which host kids from wealthy families moving to Brazil as consequence of transnational employments; on the other hand, we do have free-of-charge public schools which are struggling to find alternatives to host migrant kids from Bolivia, Syria, Nigeria, Haiti, Korea, and more recently Venezuela, coming from displacement or forced migrations. So, when you relate mobility, complexity and superdiversity, is this the kind of scenario that you have pictured in mind or is it something else?

**JB:** Yes, that is it. We work with complexity but then complexity itself is not a steady state. One of the features of complexity is that it is never finished. It is an evolving thing and, of course, here is the institutional problem: how do you train your teachers to address a constituency in their schools which is forever changing? You can become good and skilled in the classroom addressing lots of learners from Afghanistan, for instance. But three years later, they are from Eritrea or from Nigeria. How do you cope with that? We have no answer to that but here again, the thing is to at least offer a very precise diagnosis. What exactly is happening? And there again it is very often deeply misunderstood in the

sense that, here in Europe, most of the ideas with which we try to address the present forms of superdiversity are ideas from the early 1990s or even older. They are based on a sort of multi-whatever: multilingualism, multiculturalism, notions that were developed when there were like three nationalities in the classroom. Now there are fourteen!

**MS:** It is interesting what you mentioned in terms of Brazil, because quite often there is a critique being moved to superdiversity being eurocentric. A lot of scholars across the globe say we already have had superdiversity for many years and whoever has been and still is availing itself of superdiversity seems to be rather inward and Eurocentric looking. Well, though, you just said it yourself: we have new cases of movements of migration that come on top of previous migration that got settled because of colonial times, because of economic crises in the past.

**JB:** Yes, but then again, those ideas are based on a reduction of superdiversity to the demographic level of fragmentation.

**MS:** Sure, sure.

**JB:** Whereas in our view it is again the online–offline nexus. Yes, you have new demographics but all of that is being shot through with entirely new, online ways of organizing social lives. And again, in that sense, it is very often about getting the problem right, understanding exactly what is there in the way of issues, but also in the way of infrastructures and instruments for addressing it. So, those who say we have had it for centuries... No, sorry. The Internet is about 25 years old. You did not have that. You had demographic fragmentation, yes, sure, we did have that. But in late 19th century Europe, methodological nationalism evolved, and all these diverse people were rhetorically and theoretically defined as one clear and robust community, a nationality. In mainstream sociology, the nation became the default community, and all that demographic and social diversity was hocus-pocused away. Now with the arrival of social media, the first thing we see is: diversity is back with a vengeance. The old liberal idea, for instance, of a democracy being made up of a homogeneous community of opinion, is not present on Twitter. There, we see democracy as really serious fragmentation and opposition. And this is now the inevitability of things that we believed we could hocus-pocus away with a theoretical construct of a particular type of homogeneous community that was never there. And so now we have to address it because it stares us in the face.

Going deeper into this relation between Internet and democracy, definitely online communication has altered the way political actions happen. In Brazil, we are now facing a new conservative wave as a response to a struggling economy and rampant corruption, besides other vested interests that would definitely demand another interview. How do political movements in contemporary Europe compare and contrast to this neoliberal, neoconservative scenario?

MS: This one, I leave it to you.

JB: Well, you are Italian (laughs).

Because it is quite paradoxical for us to talk in theory about superdiversity and seeing this expressive conservative movement that has been threatening the very constitutive elements of contemporary debates on Human Rights: difference, plurality, conviviality, ethics and so forth.

JB: We see very similar things and, of course, the irony is that we see very similar things in some of the wealthiest societies on Earth. We have it in The Netherlands with Wilders and others, we have it in France, Belgium, Germany, Austria – they are in government there, and in Italy they are in government as well. The same goes for Scandinavian countries. So the entire EU now needs to reimagine itself as being not politically dominated *only* by moderate forces but also by a very violent and a very radical right-wing. And it is here to stay. It is not going to go away. Now, we know those are global movements nowadays and of course, the online world is the big globalizer here. It is the thing that networks the entire system, with Steve Bannon in the United States, with Facebook, with operators like Cambridge Analytica. I was just notified last week that I am one of the 30 million users of Facebook whose data have been hacked. The data has been sold. And so here is the inevitable thing that we need to consider. If an infrastructural agent like Facebook, that has an effect on 2.3 billion users, is not held democratically accountable for its actions, we are in serious trouble as democracies. All of us should be a lot more militant and alert about the non-political perception of these operators. They are just there, they provide content or the infrastructure for content. No, no, no! They *create* all sorts of things. They have created and are creating a new political reality in which for a few hundred US dollars you can buy a thousand or a million likes and become very important, very big, very visible, very influential in ways that have nothing to do with grassroots support. Those are facts that defy the old imagination of a democracy being constituted by the government on the one hand, and the individual on the other hand, with the public sphere inbetween both. Well, the public sphere is now profoundly manipulated by these operators. And with it, the entire democratic system is affected.

That is so true. And that leads to my last question in this interview. In your text “Complexity, Mobility, Migration” written along with Van der Aa you aimed at putting under scrutiny the neglected complexity of social communicative situations involving immigrants and refugees. After having described and problematized two examples, you conclude your text with a self-critique, a beautiful one, in which you acknowledge the limits of social linguistics by stating that what is left out might be the point of the entire thing. So, that leads to my question. After all, what has been left out?

JB: Action.



**MS:** The modalities of action, as we said before. I do believe I am a strong supporter of the fact that there is no sociolinguistic analysis or linguistic ethnographic analysis that cannot afford itself to forget about multimodality.

**JB:** So, what is left out is basically all the stuff we took for granted and the most important of that is action. So, the fact that people are having a conversation, for instance. Yes and no. Yes, they are having a conversation but, while doing it, they are also, for instance, raising a question, they are challenging, they are doing micronarratives, they are changing roles and positions. This is the big lesson we should draw from what Goffman said in 1964. We underestimate the complexity of what we call “the situation”. I mean, it has basically remained unaddressed for half a century and, if we go back to social media examples, there is no way in which we can make any assumption about who is there. And then, with the use of memes and emojis, we can’t just say “Oh, this is in English”. These old assumptions stated that we know exactly who is doing the action, as well as the resources used in the action. No. The only thing we have left in the online-offline nexus is the action itself. So, we need to zoom into the action and that is exactly what Goffman did: look at the action and *from* the action you will learn who the participants are, the norms that they are using, the world of meaning that they are creating, the social relationships that emerge from it, the definition of groups that you can read from the structure of particular actions.

**MS:** In other words, do not gloss it away with the big word “context”. As my students do sometimes: “it is the context”, they say. My question is what do you mean with “it is the context”? What is your working definition of the word ‘context’? And then they go silent.

**JB:** Indeed, which context?

**MS:** Which context? What is context? Please, do define context.

**JB:** These are old questions. At least we always believed that they had been solved a long time ago.

**MS:** They have not.

**JB:** I do not think we can afford now to take all of that for granted. Another new factor in the situation these days is the algorithmic environment in which you work when you go online.

**MS:** That is correct.

**JB:** Who puts you in an interaction with those particular individuals? Who does that? Not us. We have not made that choice.

**MS:** Which goes back to the redefinition of local. Which goes back to what we talked about in the beginning of the interview. What is the local nowadays? If we look at concepts like, for instance, the concept of coagulation, which has been developed in our book “Engaging Superdiversity”, it has been developed ages ago in anthropology though it is ever so to the point in contemporary global societies. We need to redefine this idea of coagulation. We need to redefine this idea of emergent “pop-up”, so to say, centers of interest where people network around it together and then put it into a dialogue, for instance, with the idea of affinity groups from James Gee. This I believe would be very constructive and useful. I did invite him to come to the Conference on Multicultural Discourses that we have recently organized but he was too busy.

**JB:** And so, here, very much like we concluded that article, we should conclude here as well with a statement of ignorance. There is an enormous amount that we do not know. So, we have to go on and think a lot on the stuff we believed we knew, for we live in a society that is changing non-stop. You never know, which is why we are researchers. We’re re-searchers, so we have to search again.

**MS:** Yeah, we are like that. Nice one.

**Thank you very much, Jan and Massimiliano, for this insightful conversation.**

**JB:** Thank you. Thank you very much for your interest.

**MS:** It was a pleasure.

**JB:** Greetings to our friends in Brazil.

**MS:** Absolutely.

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