

1 A critical sociolinguistics of globalization

1.1 The challenge

Sociolinguistically, the world has not become a village. That well-matured metaphor of globalization does not work, and that is a pity for sociolinguistics – a science traditionally more at ease when studying a village than when studying the world. Globalization is the catchword for a particular historical phase (the capitalist present, so to speak) and even if the processes we call *globalization* are not new in substance, they are new in intensity, scope and scale. The novelty transpires in the labels we use for them: one of the main features of globalization is that it has spawned its own discourses-on-globalization, thus making it into a self-conscious and seemingly autonomous political, economic, cultural and intellectual project. I will have a word or two to say about the self-consciousness and autonomy, but for now I can restrict myself to accepting the challenge of globalization, that is, to rethink our conceptual and analytic apparatus. The world has not become a village, but rather a tremendously complex web of villages, towns, neighbourhoods, settlements connected by material and symbolic ties in often unpredictable ways. That complexity needs to be examined and understood.

I consider this state of affairs a positive effect of globalization, because it forces us to think about phenomena as located in and distributed across different scales, from the global to the local, and to examine the connections between these various levels in ways that do not reduce phenomena and events to their strict context of occurrence. In other words, globalization forces sociolinguistics to unthink its classic distinctions and biases and to rethink itself as a sociolinguistics of mobile resources, framed in terms of trans-contextual networks, flows and movements. This unthinking and rethinking is long overdue (Wallerstein 2001 reminds us of that), and sociolinguistics still bears many marks of its own peculiar history, as it has focused on static variation, on local distribution of varieties, on stratified language contact, and so on. It shares this problem with many other branches of the language sciences – a point I tried to make elsewhere with respect to discourse analysis and literacy studies (Blommaert 2005, 2008). What is needed is a new vocabulary to describe events, phenomena and processes, new metaphors for representing them, new

arguments to explain them – those elements of scientific imagination we call theory. This book is theoretical in ambition, formulating proposals for a different theoretical approach to sociolinguistic issues in globalization. More directly, it describes globalization as a sociolinguistic subject matter, and language as something intrinsically connected to processes of globalization. At the same time, the book is empirically grounded; my hypotheses are based on extensive analyses of various kinds of data that instantiate, in my view, processes of globalization.

My own attempt joins an emerging tradition in sociolinguistics and related disciplines in which scholars engage with globalization (e.g. Heller 1999; de Swaan 2001; Block and Cameron 2001; Coupland 2003; Block 2005; Rampton 2006; Harris 2006; Calvet 2006; Fairclough 2006; Pennycook 2007). The engagement is not always successful, as we shall see shortly; nor does it always result in elegant pieces of intellectual work – the aspect of unthinking is sometimes left aside and replaced by a quick patch-up of current theoretical and methodological complexes. Many people still believe that the issue can be formulated as ‘language *and* globalization’, in precisely the same way as one would speak of ‘language *and* culture’, ‘language *and* society’ and so on. That is, with precisely the same problems, Language itself is seen as essentially unaffected by globalization (culture, society, and so on), and globalization is seen as just another context in which language is practised, a new one at best. This, of course, precludes the possibility that the modes of occurrence of language themselves change, and that the traditional concept of ‘language’ is dislodged and destabilized by globalization. In other words, it reduces the sociolinguistic issues of globalization to issues of *method*, while a serious consideration of them would require ontological, epistemological and methodological statements as well – it would see it as issues of *theory*.

This theory construction cannot be just another *linguistic* theory. It needs to be a theory of language in society or, more precisely, of changing language in a changing society. To some extent, this is already an ontic decision: the sociolinguistics we need is one that addresses not the traditional object of linguistics, but something far more dynamic, something fundamentally cultural, social, political and historical. That object cannot be understood as autonomous, but needs to be examined as part of the larger package: as the sociolinguistic side of a larger social system. This observation is not new; in some measure it even defines the sociolinguistic approach:

... it will not do to begin with language, or a standard linguistic description, and look outward to social context. A crucial characteristic of the sociolinguistic approach is that it looks in toward language, as it were, from its social matrix. To begin with language, or with an individual code, is to invite the limitations of a purely correlational approach, and to miss much of the organization of linguistic phenomena. (Hymes 1974: 75)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88406-8 - The Sociolinguistics of Globalization

Jan Blommaert

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The sociolinguistic approach, Hymes continues, involves a shift ‘from focus on structure to focus on function – from focus on linguistic form in isolation to linguistic form in human context’ (Hymes 1974: 77). And it is this sociolinguistic approach that I shall try to use in the chapters of this book: an approach that looks at linguistic phenomena from within the social, cultural, political and historical context of which they are part; one that considers language as organized not just in a linguistic system but in a sociolinguistic system, the rules and dynamics of which cannot be automatically derived from considering their linguistic features; and one that so examines language in an attempt to understand society. (See Hanks 1996; Agha 2007; Blommaert 2005 for elaborate discussions.) An ethnographically formulated sociolinguistics, seen from that angle, is a critical social science of language.

There is a need for such a critical social science of language. Eric Hobsbawm recently reminded us of the fact that

the currently fashionable free-market globalization has brought about a dramatic growth in economic and social inequalities both within states and internationally. There is no sign that this polarisation is not continuing within countries, in spite of a general diminution of extreme poverty. (Hobsbawm 2007: 3)

In addition, ‘the impact of this globalization is felt most by those who benefit from it least’ (Hobsbawm 2007): there is a globalized “‘reserve army of labour” of immigrants from the villages of the great zones of poverty’, and ‘while the actual scale of globalization remains modest ... its political and cultural impact is disproportionately large’ (Hobsbawm 2007: 4). Most people in the world still have no access to the new communication technologies that offer shortcuts to globalization, they live, so to speak, fundamentally un-globalized lives; but the elites in their countries have such access and use it in the pursuit of power and opportunities – a pursuit which does affect the lives of the ‘un-globalized’ citizens. Migration from the ‘zones of poverty’ into European societies, even if statistically restricted, is a major political factor in many European countries, has changed the face of some of its urban centres, has prompted or fuelled the rise of reactionary, racist or fascist right-wing groups and has generated a heightened awareness of politicized identities, of ethnolinguistic nationalism and of national chauvinism. It has also changed the face of multilingualism, as we shall see below, creating new and complex markets for linguistic and communicative resources. Such markets naturally include winners and losers, and many people nowadays find their linguistic resources to be of very low value in globalized environments. I have described this problem elsewhere as one of voice and mobility. That is, people manage or fail to make sense across contexts; their linguistic and communicative resources are mobile or lack such semiotic mobility, and this is a problem not just of difference, but of inequality. It is a problem exacerbated by the intensified processes of globalization

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(Blommaert 2005: chapter 4, 2008). Globalization, thus, is like every development of the system in which we live, something that produces opportunities as well as constraints, new possibilities as well as new problems, progress as well as regression. A critical approach must at least provide an accurate diagnostic of these issues.

Before we can move on, we need first to find some bearings for this exercise. Sociolinguistics is changing, and so is its object. I start by sketching the general lines of this change; then I engage in its effects on what we understand by sociolinguistic diversity. In so doing, I first provide introductions to some of the key concepts of this book.

1.2 Two paradigms

Modern sociolinguistics drew an artefactualized image of language into time and space, but it did not necessarily destroy the old Saussurean synchrony. The artefactual image is the image developed in modern linguistics, of language as a bounded, nameable and countable unit, often reduced to grammatical structures and vocabulary and called by names such as ‘English’, ‘French’ and so on (Blommaert 2006; also Silverstein 1998; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). Sociolinguistic studies of language variation focused strongly on diffusion – the spread of linguistic variables over a restricted horizontal space, as in the work of Trudgill, Labov and others (see Britain and Cheshire 2003). The conceptual development of space and time in such studies is superficial, and this is where we see that the Saussurean synchrony survived in modern sociolinguistics. There is attention for generational transmission (time) and distribution of variables in one locality or across localities such as cities, regions or countries (space). Labov’s famous studies of New York City (1966) and of Martha’s Vineyard (Labov 1972) are classics in this trend. Contact linguistics, in the meantime, focused on the sociolinguistic and linguistic patterns resulting from migration (Clyne 2003), and patterns of multilingualism resulting from migrations also drew the attention of scholars (Extra and Verhoeven 1998). One widespread problem with such studies is that the people whose language repertoires are studied, even if they are migrants, are ‘fixed’, so to speak, in space and time. The Saussurean synchrony was of course also a syn-
 topy. The phenomenology of migration and diaspora became an object of theoretical elaboration in cultural studies, sociology and anthropology. Certainly in the context of recent globalization processes, notions such as transcultural flows, transidiomaticity and deterritorialization made their way into mainstream social science (Appadurai 1996; see also Jacquemet 2005). We now see that the mobility of people also involves the mobility of linguistic and sociolinguistic resources, that ‘sedentary’ or ‘territorialized’ patterns of language use are complemented by ‘translocal’ or ‘deterritorialized’ forms of

language use, and that the combination of both often accounts for unexpected sociolinguistic effects. The possibility of frequent electronic contact with the country of origin, for instance, can generate new forms of language innovation (and thus contribute to language maintenance) in diasporic communities; small and marginal languages can, in the context of tourism, acquire new and unexpected forms of prestige (Heller 2003); popular culture such as hip-hop or Reggae can be a vehicle for the worldwide dissemination of particular language forms (Pennycook 2007; Richardson 2007), including new forms of literacy and message design (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). All of these dimensions of mobility still collapse in concrete spaces where actual people live and interact with one another; the structure of people's repertoires and the patterns of multilingual language use, however, become less predictable and significantly more complex, as we shall see below.

The upshot of these developments is that we see two paradigms develop, one established and one emerging. The established paradigm is the *sociolinguistics of distribution* as sketched above, in which movement of language resources is seen as movement in a horizontal and stable space and in chronological time; within such spaces, vertical stratification can occur along lines of class, gender, age, social status etc. The object of study, however, remains a 'snapshot', in which things are in place, so to speak. The second paradigm can be called a *sociolinguistics of mobility*, and it focuses not on language-in-place but on language-in-motion, with various spatiotemporal frames interacting with one another. Such spatiotemporal frames can be described as 'scales', and the assumption is that in an age of globalization, language patterns must be understood as patterns that are organized on different, layered (i.e. vertical rather than horizontal) scale-levels. And while a sociolinguistics of distribution is by and large concerned with 'language' – linguistically defined objects – a sociolinguistics of mobility is concerned with concrete *resources*. Put more concisely, it is a sociolinguistics of 'speech', of actual language resources deployed in real sociocultural, historical and political contexts (Hymes 1996, chapter 3). I discuss this topic more fully in the next chapter. Access to and control over scales is unevenly distributed, it is a matter of power and inequality, as becomes clear when we consider typical resources for access to higher (i.e. non-local and non-situationally specific) scales such as a sophisticated standard language variety or advanced multimodal and multilingual literacy skills.

This second paradigm, of course, faces the challenge of incorporating a more profound theoretical understanding of space. Space, here, is metaphorically seen as *vertical* space, as layered and stratified space. Every horizontal space (e.g. a neighbourhood, a region, or a country) is also a vertical space, in which all sorts of socially, culturally and politically salient distinctions occur. Such distinctions are *indexical* distinctions, which project minute linguistic differences onto stratified patterns of social, cultural and political value-attribution.

They convert linguistic and semiotic differences into social inequalities and thus represent the ‘normative’ dimensions of situated language use (Silverstein 2006a; Agha 2007; Blommaert 2005). The stratified and ordered nature of such indexical processes I have called, by analogy with Foucault’s ‘order of discourse’, *orders of indexicality* (Blommaert 2005: 69), and every (horizontal) space is filled with such orders of indexicality – with stratified normative complexes that organize distinctions between, on the one hand, ‘good’, ‘normal’, ‘appropriate’, and ‘acceptable’ language use and, on the other, ‘deviant’, ‘abnormal’ etc. language use. Orders of indexicality define the dominant lines for senses of belonging, for identities and roles in society, and thus underlie what Goffman called the ‘interaction order’ – which is an *indexical* order (Silverstein 2003a; Agha 2007). I return to this in the next chapter.

Movement of people across space is therefore never a move across empty spaces. The spaces are always someone’s space, and they are filled with norms, expectations, conceptions of what counts as proper and normal (indexical) language use and what does not count as such. Mobility, sociolinguistically speaking, is therefore a trajectory through different stratified, controlled and monitored spaces in which language ‘gives you away’. Big and small differences in language use locate the speaker in particular indexical and ascriptive categories (related to identity and role). As we learned from John Gumperz’s work (e.g. 1982), this is rarely inconsequential. Below, I introduce such patterns of mobility and their effects on what we understand by sociolinguistic diversity.

1.3 Globalization, super-diversity and multilingualism

Super-diversity

The ‘villages’ traditionally addressed by sociolinguists have changed. As mentioned above, the current globalization processes are best seen as part of longer, wider and deeper globalization processes, in which they represent a particular stage of development. That development is real, however, and changes in economic and technological infrastructure have especially affected what we currently understand by mobility. Migration was long seen as people *emigrating* and *immigrating* – that is, a change in the spatial organization of one’s life in an enduring way. People left their country and settled in another. In that new country, they lived separated from their country of origin, perhaps (but not necessarily) in ethnic communities. They took their languages and other cultural belongings with them, but the separation from the land of origin and the permanent nature of migration was likely to bring pressure to accommodate to the host society. A tradition of study emerged in Western host societies on such relatively isolated, stable and residential immigrant groups, often also

consisting of large communities from the same country or even region of origin: Turks in Germany, Algerians and West-Africans in France, Caribbeans and East- or South-Asians in Britain.

The 1990s brought a change in the nature and profile of migration to Western host societies, and Steven Vertovec (2006: 1) summarizes that process with respect to Great Britain as follows:

Over the past ten years, the nature of immigration to Britain has brought with it a transformative ‘diversification of diversity’ not just in terms of ethnicities and countries of origin, but also with respect to a variety of significant variables that affect where, how, and with whom people live.

These variables, Vertovec explains,

include a differentiation in immigration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights, labour market experiences, gender and age profiles, spatial factors, and local area responses by service providers and residents ... The interplay of these factors is what is meant here, in summary fashion, by the notion of ‘super-diversity’.

The new migrants typically settle in older immigrant neighbourhoods, which thus develop into a layered immigrant space, where resident (‘old’) immigrants often rent spaces to newer, more temporary or transient groups, and where new segments of the labour market are developed. Many of the new immigrants live in economically and legally precarious conditions, and many of them are strongly dependent upon informal employment and solidarity networks such as churches (Blommaert *et al.* 2005; Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005a, 2005b). The extreme linguistic diversity in such neighbourhoods generates complex multilingual repertoires in which often several (fragments of) ‘migrant’ languages and lingua francas are combined. And such neighbourhoods often display a density of mediating institutions such as welfare and employment offices, as well as night shops, money transfer bureaus such as Western Union and – significantly – telephone and Internet shops where international phone calls and Internet access are offered at bargain prices.

Super-diversity poses descriptive as well as theoretical challenges. Descriptively, these globalized neighbourhoods appear chaotic, and common assumptions about the national, regional, ethnic, cultural or linguistic status of the inhabitants often prove to be useless. The presuppositions of common integration policies – that we know who the immigrants are, and that they have a shared language and culture – can no longer be upheld. In addition, the dense presence of telephone and Internet shops shows that even if new migrants reside in one particular place, they are capable of maintaining intensive contacts with networks elsewhere, including often their countries of origin. A burgeoning network of satellite and Internet providers also allows them to follow (and be involved in) events in their country of origin and to consume its media and cultural products. Their spatial organization, consequently, is local as well as

translocal, real as well as virtual – and all of this has effects on the structure and development of language repertoires and patterns of language use. Theoretically, this stretches the limits of existing frameworks for analysing and understanding multilingualism and the dynamics of language change. We can illustrate the complexity of these phenomena and theoretical issues by looking at my own globalized neighbourhood in Berchem, an inner-city part of Antwerp, Belgium.

Multilingual repertoires and super-diversity

The repertoires of new migrants often appear to be ‘truncated’ (Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck 2005a; see also section 4.1 below): highly specific ‘bits’ of language and literacy varieties combine in a repertoire that reflects the fragmented and highly diverse life-trajectories and environments of such people. Thus, recent West-African (e.g. Nigerian) immigrants in Berchem may combine one or more African languages with a West-African indigenized English, which will be used with some interlocutors in the neighbourhood, and will also be the medium of communication during weekly worship sessions in a new Evangelical church in the neighbourhood. English, however, is not part of the repertoire of most other immigrants in the neighbourhood. Most of the shops, for instance, are owned by Turkish or Moroccan people, who often use vernacular forms of German or French as ‘emergency’ lingua francas. Thus, when a Nigerian woman goes to buy bread in a Turkish-owned bakery, the code for conducting the transaction will, for both, be a clearly non-native and very limited variety of local vernacular Dutch, mixed with some English, or German, words. In the phone shops, vernacular English will have slightly more currency, because the phone shops are typically run by people from India or Pakistan. Note, however, that the particular varieties of English spoken in such transactions will be very different: none will be ‘standard’, each variety will reflect informal patterns of acquisition and an uneasiness in use.

The Dutch used in the bakery is a minimal, informally acquired small ‘bit’ of language, a specialized language skill, limited to specific domains of interactions, and showing significant limitations compared to fluent speakers. It is insufficient for successful communication in institutional encounters: bureaucratic procedures are in standard and literate varieties of Dutch, typically varieties that are associated with formal acquisition efforts. Thus, when a Nigerian woman goes to her daughter’s school for consultation on her child’s progress, she will have to revert to her non-native English. This will then be met by a Belgian–Flemish variety of English from the teachers, and the interaction will typically be less than smooth. The medium of communication between mother and child will be a mixed code, often blending unevenly distributed chunks of Dutch and English. Naturally the child, as a result of her immersion in a formal language learning environment, has access to more elaborate varieties

of standard and local vernacular Dutch and will often have to assist the mother and the teacher in communication attempts. This, importantly, points towards another peculiarity of language in such neighbourhoods: the fact that language tasks often involve *collaborative work*. People may call on others, or others may volunteer to translate and assist in communication. This is not only the case for tasks that involve literacy; it can also be noticed in face-to-face encounters. People very often pool their competences and skills in particular languages when they have to accomplish demanding communication tasks.

At home, the Nigerian family will have access to television, and the choice will go to English-medium channels such as BBC World or MTV, with an occasional foray, often initiated by the children, into Dutch-medium children's programmes. There will be a very low level of consumption of local printed mass-media, and access to printed sources from Nigeria will be restricted. At the same time, telephone contacts in the native languages will be maintained with people back home and fellow migrants from the same region of origin, now living in Brussels, London or Paris. Occasionally, there will be mutual visits during which the African regional language might be the medium of communication among adults, while the children revert to vernacular forms of English to interact with each other. Their exposure to education environments in which different languages are the medium of instruction – Dutch and French, for instance – constrains the use of any other language.

Thus we see very fragmented and 'incomplete' – 'truncated' – language repertoires, most of which consist of spoken, vernacular and non-native varieties of different languages, with an overlay of differentially developed literacy skills in one or some languages (depending on the level of literacy at the time of migration). We also see how many communication tasks are accomplished collaboratively, by combining the resources and skills of several people. The particular patterns of such repertoires are difficult to establish in detail – here is the descriptive challenge. Repertoires such as these require close inspection; chapter 4 addresses this issue more fully. The sociolinguistic world of these people is strictly local (the neighbourhood) as well as widely translocal (involving the network of fellow migrants elsewhere, communication with people back home, and the media). And internally, we see variation in language repertoires, in which adults have different repertoires from children; fellow migrants from the same region now living elsewhere have different repertoires again.

The local environment of these migrants is abundantly multilingual. Since Nigerians are a very small minority, their languages are invisible in the public space. The older resident communities – Turks and Moroccans – do publicly display the formal, literate aspects of their multilingualism. We see Arabic and Turkish displayed in shops and on posters announcing cultural or political events. Such public language displays can index the size and the degree of solidification of particular immigrant communities. Thus, Albanian posters



Figure 1.1 Advertisement of the rates in a phone shop



Figure 1.2 Money transfer advertisement

have recently begun to appear, indicating the existence of a well-organized and resident Albanian migrant community in Belgium. Groups that have not yet achieved that level of stability and visibility revert to highly unstable forms of written language, mixing English and Dutch and betraying non-native pronunciation of words, as the display of rates in phone shops illustrates (figure 1.1). They are also addressed by fully globalized signs in (near-)Standard English, advertising services such as money transfer (figure 1.2) that cater to specific needs of recent and economically vulnerable immigrants.