Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes

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Chronicles of Complexity

Jan Blommaert

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In memory of Jens Normann Jørgensen

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Preface and Acknowledgments

It took me a long time to write this small book, and the reasons for this will be discussed in the pages of this study. One has a tendency to assume that one's everyday habitat is a well-known place that holds few, if any, mysteries to its inhabitants. I believe I held this silly idea when I formed the plan, several years ago, of devoting a book-length study to my own neighborhood in Antwerp. I had to abandon that idea rather quickly, for my neighborhood proved to be astonishingly complex and impossible to 'describe' in a traditional sense – that is, using the synchronic descriptive stance that provides the bread and butter of sociolinguistics.

Thus, while I tried to study something very local – the streets around my house – I began to see the wider, indeed fundamental relevance of the exercise. In order to study my own space adequately, several major methodological and epistemological interventions were required. I had, for instance, to shift from a focus on mobility, articulated in several earlier works of mine, to what I now see as its logical extension: complexity. And in a way, strangely, this brought me back to some very old interests I had, in my student years, in chaos and complexity theory. It sometimes takes a decade to move from one intellectual position to another, even if the distance between these positions appears to be minimal after the fact. And then, one finds oneself in a familiar place – a new intellectual position that is in effect a very old one. It has been a sobering experience indeed.

Getting there was entirely a matter of teamwork. The work on sociolinguistic superdiversity that I have been doing over the past handful of years has, from day one, been part of the activities of what became INCOLAS – the International Symposium for Language and Superdiversity. Themes and approaches to them were discussed on a regular basis, since 2009, with that wonderful troupe of colleagues and friends who collaborate with me under the INCOLAS umbrella: Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris, Sirpa Leppänen, Adrian Blackledge, Angela Creese, Marilyn Martin-Jones, Jens Normann Jørgensen,

Martha Karrebaek, Lian Madsen, Janus Møller, Christopher Stroud, Karel Arnaut, David Parkin, Steven Vertovec and their collaborators. My own team of colleagues in Tilburg was evidently the first critical audience throughout, and the contributions of Sjaak Kroon, Max Spotti, Piia Varis, Jef Van der Aa, Fie Velghe, Xuan Wang, Caixia Du, Kasper Juffermans, Dong Jie, Jinling Li, Jos Swanenberg, Paul Post and April Huang have been crucial. People who are close in our field but less close to home were also important providers of feedback throughout the process: Alastair Pennycook, Adam Jaworski, Nik Coupland, Gunther Kress, Michael Silverstein, Asif Agha, Lionel Wee, Rob Moore, Ron Scollon, Pan Lin, Stephen May and Monica Barni all fed me with ideas and insights that left traces in this book. And Frederik, Alexander and Pika, along with several neighbors from Berchem, were continuously sharp and critical listeners and readers of what I had to say about our neighborhood.

Some parts of this book have been previously published. An earlier version of Chapter 2 was published as Blommaert and Huang (2010), 'Historical bodies and historical space', *Journal of Applied Linguistics* 6 (3), 11–26. Important parts of Chapter 3 appeared as Blommaert and Huang (2010), 'Semiotic and spatial scope: towards a materialist semiotics', *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies* 62. A version of Chapter 5 appeared as 'Infrastructures of superdiversity: Conviviality and language in an Antwerp neighborhood', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2013). An abridged version of Chapter 6, finally, appeared as Blommaert (2011), The Vatican of the diaspora. *Jaarboek voor Liturgieonderzoek* 27, 243–259. I am deeply indebted to April Huang for allowing me to republish the co-authored papers in this single-authored book, as well as to Equinox Publishers, SAGE, and to the Instituut voor Christelijk Cultureel Erfgoed, Groningen and the Instituut voor Liturgische en Rituele Studies, Tilburg, for permission to use these published papers here.

A final word of thanks is due to my series editors Alastair Pennycook, Brian Morgan and Ryuko Kubota, and to Tommi Grover, Anna Roderick and Sarah Williams of Multilingual Matters for accepting this small book in what I consider to be the most outstanding book series on language and globalization, and for seeing me through the editing and production process. I am very proud to join the ranks of authors in the exquisite Critical Language and Literacy Studies series.

If readers find this a book worth reading, it is owing to the people I have mentioned here; if not, I am happy to take the blame myself and accept that it is a poor book in spite of the massive input and support of this large team. It is for the reader to judge now.

Jan Blommaert
Berchem, March 2013

Series Editors' Preface

Linguistic landscape research has taken off in the last few years. There seem to be several reasons for this: first, an increased attention to space, location and the physical environment. Some 10 years ago, Scollon and Scollon called for 'progressively more acute analyses of the ways in which places in time and space come to have subjective meanings for the humans who live and act within them' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: 12). This was a move aimed to understand in much greater depth the role of space and place in relation to language. Where previously a lot of sociolinguistic work had tended to operate with a rather underexamined notion of 'context', this new orientation urged us to explore the relation between signs and their place in space much more carefully. Second, a growing interest in urban multilingualism, coupled with a focus on linguistic ethnography, increased our awareness of the need to explore the lived experience of languages in the city rather than the demolinguistic mapping of variety. Third, a focus on language policy in relation to public signs started to draw attention to the ways in which different languages were represented in public spaces. The problem of English or other dominant languages also became a focus here, with attention turning to the ways in which advertising, for example, often thrust English into the public domain at the expense of other languages.

The notion of linguistic landscapes has clearly resonated with researchers interested in social and political roles of languages (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009): it emphasizes that language is not something that exists only in people's heads, in texts written for institutional consumption or in spoken interactions, but rather is part of the physical environment. At least in urban contexts – as Coulmas (2009) points out, a better term might indeed be *linguistic cityscape* – language surrounds us, directs us, hales us, calls for our attention, flashes its messages to us. Linguistic landscapes take us into the spatiality of language; we are invited to explore what Scollon and Scollon (2003: 12) called *geosemiotics*: 'an integrative view of these multiple

semiotic systems which together form the meanings which we call place'. As Shohamy and Gorter (2009: 4) explain, linguistic landscape (LL) 'contextualizes the public space within issues of identity and language policy of nations, political and social conflicts … LL is a broader concept than documentation of signs; it incorporates multimodal theories to include sounds, images, and graffiti'.

From these beginnings, attention to the LL has now become not only a focus in itself but also part of a broader sociolinguistic toolkit to study anything from graffiti (Jørgensen[1], 2008; Pennycook, 2010) to Welsh teahouses in Patagonia (Coupland, 2013), the semiotic landscape of airports (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2013) or the Corsican tourist scene (Jaffe & Oliva, 2013). Despite this productive space that the idea of LLs has opened up, there are nonetheless some more critical questions that need to be asked. One basic concern – and another reason that has led to the growth of LL research – is the ease of using digital cameras as research tools (no need for interviews, ethnographies, field notes, transcriptions, translations: just press a button, download, insert, and it's done). Linguistic landscape research, therefore, has perhaps at times been too easy. In this context, however, the benefits of LL research as an accessible pedagogical strategy should also be appreciated. Elana Shohamy's accounts (many personal communications) of her students heading out across Tel Aviv and other towns, cities and villages with their cameras and smart phones, give strong testimony to its usefulness as the students return with stories, images, new awarenesses and politicizations of the LLs of Israel.

At the same time, the ways in which the study of LLs has often proceeded has constrained the possibilities of seeing LLs in more dynamic terms. Both the concept of language embedded in the 'linguistic' and the concept of context embedded in the 'landscape' have been commonly viewed from perspectives that limit the possibilities of thinking about language and place in more vibrant ways. A common construction of language in this work, for example, has been as an indicator of a particular language, with the focus then being on the representation of different languages in public space as part of an attempt to address questions about which languages are used for particular public duties, how official language policies are reflected in public signs, how local sign-making may present other forms of diversity, and so on. While interesting enough questions in themselves, this sort of LL research leaves many other questions hanging: Can we so readily identify the language of a sign and assume the consequences of using one language or another (Pennycook, 2009)? Which signs are more salient and how do people read them? Who writes the signs and why? How do we interact with the LL we inhabit? Malinowski's (2009) question 'Who authors the landscape?',

therefore, becomes not only a question as to who has written what sign but how our landscapes are made through language. In order to understand signs in landscapes, we need signographies (ethnographies of signs) rather than sign cartographies (maps of signs).

Which brings us to Blommaert's work. He has long argued (e.g. 2005) that in order to understand texts, signs or discourses, we cannot rely solely on textual analysis: rather we need textual ethnographies. In a significant critique of some of the textual and analytic myopias of critical discourse analysis, therefore, Blommaert has suggested that critical analysis needs to get beyond 'the old idea that a chunk of discourse has only *one* function and *one* meaning' (2005: 34), and that 'linguists have no monopoly over theories of language' (2005: 35). He goes on to suggest that there are therefore a range of candidates to provide an understanding of how language works, and that 'if we wish to understand contemporary forms of inequality in and through language,' we should look not only inside language but outside (in society) as well (2005: 35). This comment echoes the earlier remark by Bourdieu: 'As soon as one treats language as an autonomous object, accepting the radical separation which Saussure made between internal and external linguistics, between the science of language and the science of the social uses of language, one is condemned to looking within words for the power of words, that is, looking for it where it is not to be found' (1991: 107).

The need to understand signs, discourses and language ethnographically, from the outside as well as the inside, is one of the central arguments of this new book, where Blommaert brings to the domain of LL research an insistence on the need for 'deep ethnographic immersion'. There are two sides to this: on the one hand the need to grasp the situated and momentary occurrence of a sign in this shop window, on this street, at this time; on the other hand a need to situate these observations within a much longer historical trajectory, so that we can also grasp the layers of history and meaning at play in a sign, as well as its locational history and the broad array of meanings it indexes across time and space. This brings us to the second major focus of this work – in part an obvious result of (or precursor to) the ethnographic focus – the idea of complexity. Here, linking to the theme of superdiversity, Blommaert argues we need to try to account for the complexity of forces and meanings that dynamically come to bear on the instance of a sign and its interpretation, noting the simultaneous operation of multi-scaled and polycentric systems of meaning, a conceptual approach conveyed through his notions of 'ordered indexicalities' and 'layered simultaneity'.

The idea of complexity, in which non-linear, recursive and emergent forms of meaning making are foregrounded, is crucially important not only

for understanding LLs, but also for how we teach and learn second/additional languages, particularly in the super-diversifying, cosmopolitan spaces that Blommaert details. Towards this goal, areas of complementarity and application can be noted: for example, in Diane Larsen-Freeman's (2012) work on complexity and chaos theory in SLA, and her dynamic and emergent notion of 'grammaring' for pedagogy; in Mark Clarke's (2003) innovative adaptation of Gregory Bateson's systems theory for language teacher education; and in the late, Leo van Lier's (2004, 2011) ground-breaking work on the ecology and semiotics of language learning and its possibilities for expanding the scope of ELT practice: 'It is clear that an ecological and semiotic stance on language learning is anchored in agency, as all of life is. Teaching, in its very essence, is promoting agency. Pedagogy is guiding this agency wisely' (2011: 391). The idea of complexity, so conceived, is not a loss of rigor but instead a source of empowerment, an epistemology by which social agents may recognize and re-imagine possibilities for change.

The Critical Language and Literacy Series is most fortunate to have *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes* on its list. Another important aspect of this book is the intellectual trajectory of which it is a part, the complexity of polycentric systems of meaning that dynamically come to bear on this text. In a series of major works Blommaert (2005, 2008, 2010) has drawn attention to the need to understand language ethnographically, locally, historically, and in relation to mobility. As he argues, language is best understood sociolinguistically as '*mobile speech*, not as static language, and lives can consequently be better investigated on the basis of repertoires set against a real historical and spatial background' (2010: 173). This book therefore also needs to be read as the latest stage of a decade of key work bridging sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, drawing attention to the need to understand local language practices such as grassroots literacy not only in terms of their immediate surrounds but also in terms of how they got there, historically and spatially. *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes* on the one hand takes Blommaert's work forward though this detailed examination of the LL of Oud-Berchem, an inner-city neighbourhood in Antwerp, while on the other hand it takes work in LLs – and discourse analysis and sociolinguistics more generally – forward by insisting on the importance of the ethnographic understanding of textual complexities.

Alastair Pennycook
Brian Morgan
Ryuko Kubota

Note

(1) Jens Normann Jørgensen died on 29th May, 2013, during the writing of this preface. His inspirational work has had an enormous impact on the work of many of us in the fields of sociolinguistics and education. A close collaborator of Jan Blommaert, too, he will be very sadly missed.

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1 Introduction: New Sociolinguistic Landscapes

These days, sociolinguists do not just walk around the world carrying field notebooks and sound recording equipment; they also carry digital photo cameras with which they take snapshots of what has, in the meantime, become known as 'linguistic landscapes'. Such landscapes capture the presence of publicly visible bits of written language: billboards, road and safety signs, shop signs, graffiti and all sorts of other inscriptions in the public space, both professionally produced and grassroots. The locus where such landscapes are being documented is usually the late-modern, globalized city: a densely multilingual environment in which publicly visible written language documents the presence of a wide variety of (linguistically identifiable) groups of people (e.g. Backhaus, 2007; Barni, 2008; Barni & Bagna, 2008; Barni & Extra, 2008; Ben-Rafael *et al.*, 2006; Coupland & Garrett, 2010; Gorter, 2006; Jaworski, 2010; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Lin, 2009; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Excursions into less urban and more peri-urban or rural spaces are rare, even though they occur and yield stimulating results (e.g. Juffermans, 2010; Stroud & Mpendukana, 2009; Wang, 2013; Juffermans also provides a broad spectre of signs in his analysis of The Gambia). In just about a decade, linguistic landscape studies (henceforth LLS) have gained their place on the shelves of the sociolinguistics workshop.

I welcome this development for several reasons. The first and most immediate reason is the sheer potential offered by LLS. This potential is *descriptive* as well as *analytical*. In descriptive terms, LLS considerably expand the range of sociolinguistic description from, typically, (groups of) speakers to *spaces*, the physical spaces in which such speakers dwell and in which they pick up and leave, so to speak, linguistic deposits, 'waste', signposts and roadmaps. Note that older sociolinguistic traditions such as dialectology *also* included space into their object – the typical scholarly product of dialectology