

Jan Blommaert*

From groups to actions and back in online-offline sociolinguistics

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2018-0114>

Abstract: The papers in this volume all articulate a keen awareness of the shift in sociolinguistic economies caused by online technologies. We now live in an online-offline nexus of communication, and realizing this invites changes in the ways in which we traditionally view and imagine the foundations of our disciplinary approaches. In reviewing the papers, I focus on two important aspects of such revisionist enterprises. One is the emergence of an analytical triad of infrastructures, actions and moralizations, evidence of which is offered in the different papers. The second aspect is of a more general nature: we can suggest, on the basis of the evidence presented in this volume, to reverse the general heuristic of research from groups-individuals-language towards interaction-individuals-groups. This reversal of direction would equip our disciplines with an extraordinarily powerful theory of social action.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, social theory, online-offline, interaction, theory of action

It is profoundly flattering and humbling at the same time to be asked to comment on a body of other scholars' work inspired by and drawing on one's own.¹ The reason why it is flattering should be self-evident; the reason why it is humbling is less easy to explain. It has to do with how these other scholars demonstrate, in their application of ideas and notions drawn from my work, the limitations of the latter – the loose ends; the points where a concept or line of argument is merely an inspiration to be reshaped by entirely different approaches to the issue; the places where my individual efforts reached their limits and demand the creative commitment of a community of others. I

¹ I am grateful to Najma Al Zidjaly for a million things, including bringing me to Oman to attend a spectacularly interesting conference; including her relentless enthusiasm for preparing this collection of papers; and including her infinite patience in waiting for my contribution to the collection.

***Corresponding author: Jan Blommaert**, DCU, Tilburg University, Tilburg 5037AB, Netherlands, E-mail: j.blommaert@tilburguniversity.edu

encounter all of these in this collection of papers, and the work of these authors pushes and motivates me to take things further.

The work reported in the paper in this collection articulates a *fundamental* shift in perspective: not merely an adjustment of method and of the choice of data, but a shift at the level of what I called (following C. Wright Mills) the “sociological imagination” informing sociolinguistic work (Blommaert 2017, Blommaert 2018).² It is a shift from a scholarly universe almost entirely dominated by theoretical and methodological preferences for offline spoken discourse in fixed and clearly definable timespace, sociocultural and interpersonal contexts and identities, to one in which the world of communication is – at the most basic level – seen as an online-offline nexus in which much of what we assumed to be natural, primordial and commonsense about language-in-society needs to be revised, rethought and redeveloped.

The argument I tried to build was that in such revisionist exercises, the facts of communication are a fine point of departure for reassessing their place in what we conventionally call the social order or social structure. This outspoken empirical bias inevitably leads to a focus on *small things*: actual moments of interaction taking the shape of meaningful social conduct, provoking effects of ascribed and/or inhabited identity, group formation, alignment and/or distancing (cf. Parkin 2016). These small things include the kinds of routine acts of communication often qualified as “phatic” or otherwise “light” – the use of emojis, memes and likes in social media discourse; sharing, retweeting and reposting; forms of deference, politeness and repair in online conversation; the acquisition and deployment of implicit codes for “normal” conduct in online gaming communities; and the establishment of conviviality in ad-hoc and “light” online groups. Precisely such phenomena are central to the papers in this collection, and the authors all demonstrate how such innocuous, “light” forms of communication have powerful ordering effects in the communities in which they are normatively ratified, structuring not just personal and collective identities, but lodging such identities firmly in highly specific, circumscribable chronotopic forms of context. The chronotopic nature of identity work is hard to overlook in online interactions – all the papers in this collection testify to that – but the validity of that point is undoubtedly much wider (cf. Blommaert and De Fina 2017; Karimzad and Catedral 2018; Kroon and Swanenberg 2019; also Agha 2007). And in the same move, the specific chronotopic character of online

² Note that I use the term “sociolinguistic” here in its widest sense, not as a disciplinary label but as a loosely descriptive term to capture work addressing language-in-society. For such work, a wide range of disciplinary terms can be and are being used.

discourse points us towards a crucial analytic feature too often neglected but fully addressed by the authors in this volume: infrastructures for social action.

1 Infrastructures, actions, moralizations

As briefly mentioned above, studies of language-in-society have long taken spoken dyadic interaction as the “primitive” and, consequently, the theoretically most fundamental form of language and language usage. This meant that, in practice and in several branches of the study of language-in-society, a highly fragmentary notion of ‘context’ emerged, often restricted to the ‘co-textual’ features of discourse, i.e. the parts of discourse preceding and following the particular fragment to be analyzed. The invocation of elements of so-called ‘distal context’ (non-immediate [or non-co-textual] inferential material) has consistently been a bone of contention, notably in sub-branches of conversation analysis, and has remained a diacritic identifying specific ‘schools’ and approaches (cf. Gumperz 1982; for discussions see e.g. Silverstein 1992; Cicourel 1992; Duranti 1997; Blommaert 2001). Such narrow views of context, obviously, did not address the fullness of what Goffman called “the social situation”:

A student interested in the properties of speech may find himself having to look at the physical setting in which the speaker performs his gestures, simply because you cannot describe a gesture fully without reference to the extra-bodily in which it occurs. And someone interested in the linguistic correlates of social structure may find that he must attend to the social occasion when someone of given social attributes makes his appearance before others. Both kinds of students must therefore look at what we vaguely call the social situation. And that is what has been neglected. (Goffman 1964: 134)

Observe how Goffman balances two dimensions of the social situation here: (a) the ‘hard’ physical setting for interaction and (b) the sociocultural conventions governing the interaction. The first dimension is, if you wish, ‘infrastructural’ and points towards the material conditions affecting the situation and delineating the affordances available to participants. In an age of social media, this infrastructural dimension becomes compelling, and for the simplest possible reason: no form of online communication is possible without the affordances offered by the technology shaping the online sphere of social life.

Infrastructural aspects of the situation are, thus, *determining* the actions performed online, and they form the decisive argument in favor of the newness of the communicative and interactional phenomena we observe there: no equivalent for the present usage of emojis and hashtags, to name just those,

existed prior to the availability of the infrastructures presently organizing and enabling their discursive deployment. These infrastructures have effectively and profoundly reordered the deep structures of the sociolinguistic economies in which we live – the *sociolinguistic system* in the words of Dell Hymes (1996).³ There remains, therefore, a huge task ahead of redescribing and reinterpreting modes of interaction and communication that may, indeed, look similar to forms previously attested, but now incorporated in entirely new and fundamentally different patterns of circulation, distribution and social effects. *Linguistic* similarities should not obscure *sociolinguistic* differences.

This brings me to the second point. These infrastructures shape new conditions for *social action*, and close attention to such actions is indispensable in the huge task I just outlined.

One good reason for this is offered in Sinatora's excellent discussion of online activism in the context of the Syrian crisis, and Tovaes' equally incisive analysis of Ukrainian YouTube examples illustrating emerging grassroots political movements. In both cases, we can see how the online infrastructures shape *new public spaces* affording modes of political critique and mobilization not otherwise, or elsewhere, possible in that way and to that degree of intensity. Such new spaces are chronotopic (as Al Zidjaly and Sinatora emphasize), in the sense that we should see them as specific timespace configurations in which participant roles, behavioral scripts and appropriate resources for realizing the script are interactionally established as normative. We get, to adopt Garfinkel's (2002) terminology for a moment, chronotopically circumscribed "formats" for social action requiring constant "congregational work" by those participating in the social actions.

This congregational work is performed by means of new multimodal discursive resources. YouTube clips (as in Tovaes' analysis) evidently belong to this category, but perhaps the clearest examples of new multimodal semiotic resources are the emojis, selfies and memes discussed in the papers by Graham and Gordon, now deployed as normal and unremarkable discourse-functional instruments – an expansion of the repertoires of participants in online discourse events, and a rescripting of genres such as those of "debate" or "learning". As for the latter, Gordon demonstrates how the use of pictures (selfies, notably) can be deployed as an *argumentative* device in strategies of persuasion, articulating a particularly compelling "veridictional" epistemic stance – pictures don't lie, and displaying them puts the addressee in the equally compelling position of "eye witness".

³ I am making this point with some emphasis because of persistent denials of the innovative character of online sociocultural and sociolinguistic conduct and the necessity to rethink some theoretical foundations of our disciplines as a consequence of this innovation. For an early discussion, see Blommaert (2015).

Such forms of stance-taking and addressee-positioning can be ranged under what Najma Al Zidjaly calls “complex identity work” in online environments. It is the deployment of specific resources – indexicals, in other words – in online chronotopes that enables such complex modes of identity work, and those can be transient and “light”, as in Graham’s online gaming communities. But they can also be oriented towards more traditional “thick” identity categories, such as nationality and ethnolinguistic belonging in Tovaresh’s discussion of Ukrainian YouTube clips. The “congregations” doing the congregational work can, thus, be organized and oriented in very different ways: pointing towards relatively enclosed online chronotopes (such as that of online gaming), as well as towards a relatively more open online-offline set of chronotopes, such as those of nationality and ethnolinguistic “groupness” or (as in Sinatora’s paper) positions within an existing political field. In each case, we need to look into the fine grain of the congregational work performed by the actors, for we usually only have the actions as hard evidence.

To clarify the latter: in observing online discourse, we cannot as a rule use reliable *a priori* assumptions about the participants, nor the ratified resources deployed. Participants, as we know, often operate as an avatar in online interaction, rendering impossible any robust inference as to gender, age, nationality and so forth. Add to this the algorithmic effects on audience-shaping and the presence of inactive participants in online interaction (sometimes called “lurkers”) and the methodological issue is clear: we usually *don’t know* who is involved in the interaction, and this counts both at the individual level and the collective one. As for resources, we can only observe the values and effects they acquire in the interaction itself – take as examples the convivial effects of “light” practices of emoji exchange, of repair and of “winking and nodding” described in the papers by Gordon, Tovaresh and Graham. There is no *a priori* “convivial” function to the resources deployed by participants, they are interactionally and chronotopically established as ratified resources within a particular congregation, and they are done so by overwhelmingly “moral” practices of normative ratification, uptake and re-deployment.

Next to infrastructures and actions, *moralizations* form the final element in the analytical line I can extract from the papers in this volume, and together they cast, in my view, the foundations for a programmatic analytical strategy. The complex identity work outlined by Al Zidjaly proceeds largely by means of ratifications of (or challenges to) interactional patterns congregationally emerging in online chronotopes. In simpler terms: the moral-normative interactional order is an emergent phenomenon in which existing and relatively enduring moral-normative codes (such as those circumscribing national belonging in Tovaresh’s paper, political positions in Sinatora’s paper, or membership of specific

gaming communities in Graham's paper) can be blended with, or exchanged for, purely situation-specific actor positions articulating specific epistemic-affective-moral stances in an ongoing event – as we can see in Gordon's examples of online discussions on weight loss (cf. Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017; see also Goodwin 2007). The moral dimension shines through in the plethora of "light" interactional practices of conviviality in online environments – something observable in all the papers in this volume (and see also Varis and Blommaert 2015). And it is best epitomized by the various forms of "like" functions that have become a standard feature of all social media platforms.

2 From groups to actions and back

I mentioned earlier the established preference in many branches of the study of language-in-society for dyadic spoken interaction as the most elementary and theoretically fundamental form of human communication. And my review of the papers in this volume was aimed at showing the creative revisionism practiced and displayed by the authors. In passing, I hinted at the uncertainty, unavoidable in online contexts, about participant identities, both individually and collectively.

I wish to expand a bit on this latter point, for this, too, refers to an age-old assumption used in studies of language-in-society. The assumption can be summarized as follows: whenever we analyze language-in-society, we see language as the final part of a heuristic triad:

GROUP > INDIVIDUAL > LANGUAGE

In plain terms: the language we analyze is tied to a "([non-]native) speaker", who in turn is a member of a "(speech/language) community". Concretely, when we analyze a French utterance, we consider it the product of a speaker of French, who is a member of the French language community. Features of that community affect the individual speaker, and in sequence affect the particular forms of language produced by that individual. Communities and individuals – as *identity constructs* – are thus seen as *pre-existent* and somehow "reflected" in the features of language we have in front of us. And while language is a variable given, degrees of stability are attributed to the speaker and the community.⁴

⁴ Classical variationist sociolinguistics is a textbook example of an approach operating on this assumption (for a discussion, see Eckert 2012). But the idea of the (native) speaker is much more widespread across language-focused disciplines and, certainly in assumed connection with

This is a form of sociological imagination, and – I am not the first to observe this – it is flawed on several points (see e.g. Blumer 1969; Cicourel 1973; Williams 1992). One of its flaws is the focus on *language* as an outcome, a product with a sui generis character, rather than on *interaction* in which language is deployed as part of a larger behavioral arrangement. In sociological terms, the flaw is in the absence of a theory of action explaining the social order in relation to language-actors.⁵ There is no space here for developing the full argument, but when we take interaction as the point of departure – as the most essential form of social action in general – the order of the triad is reversed:

INTERACTION > INDIVIDUAL > GROUP

The papers in this volume provide sound empirical reasons for adopting this alternative theory of action, and I have briefly mentioned them above. In the online chronotopes addressed here, the identity of participants is a matter of fundamental and unsolvable uncertainty, and the *tentative* or *indicative* nature of interactional moves (already emphasized by Mead; see Blumer 2004) is highlighted. When we make an interactional move, we do so with an anticipated reaction and uptake by the interlocutor in mind; when the addressee is unknown, such proleptic moves are inevitably more perilous than when we make them in the presence of a better known interlocutor. We thus *attempt* to make meaningful moves, but unless there is ratifying uptake from someone else our attempts are merely indicative of what we wish to achieve.

This problem was described in an earlier literature on online interaction as “context collapse”:

the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients. (Vitak 2012: 541)

Context collapse is the effect of a technology which “complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other” (Marwick and Boyd 2010: 115). We see how, in this definition of the problem, the flawed assumptions mentioned above control the argument. We can only produce clear and transparent meanings *from within* clearly defined

more or less established communities, perennially problematic, as Ben Rampton (1995) conclusively demonstrated. See also Silverstein (1998) for an incisive analysis of the problem.

⁵ Or, one could alternatively say, the flaw is in the adoption of a highly simplistic linear theory of action in which features from the community are merely “carried over” or “transmitted” by individuals into language. See Blumer (2004, chapter 1) for a lucid discussion.

communities of which we as well as our audiences are members – so it seems. When we examine the interaction itself, however, we see different things: people are eminently able to make themselves understood even in the presence of unknown or diffuse audiences (Szabla and Blommaert 2018; also Tagg et al. 2017; Georgakopoulou 2017). In fact, it is through the *specific actions by participants that “audiences” take shape* and that the modes and resources required to make sense to them are identified, very much in the ways documented in this volume by Gordon and Graham. We see how the particular actions of participants precipitate specific identity positions and patterns of normativity within the congregation, regardless of the a priori uncertainty about all of this.

I see the growing awareness of the impact of the online infrastructure on really-existent sociolinguistic economies as an opportunity to change the general direction of our heuristic strategies: not a heuristic that takes us from groups (linearly) towards individuals and eventually towards language; but one in which we start from actual instances of interaction and move towards individuals and groups. This may enable us to make far more accurate and realistic statements about who is who in the online-offline nexus of communication. But even more importantly: it would equip our disciplines with an exceptionally powerful theory of action and, consequently, with exceptional relevance for more general social-theoretical arguments and constructs.

References

- Agha, Asif. 2007. *Language and social relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2001. Context is/as critique. *Critique of Anthropology* 21 (1). 13–32.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2015. Commentary: Superdiversity old and new. *Language and Communication* 44. 82–88.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2017. Society through the lens of language: A new look at social groups and integration. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, paper 178. https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/0a9afaa2-3e77-4ff4-b267-899296bf4150_TPCS_178_Blommaert.pdf
- Blommaert, Jan. 2018. *Durkheim and the internet: On sociolinguistics and the sociological imagination*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Blommaert, Jan & Anna De Fina. 2017. Chronotopic identities: On the spacetime organization of who we are. In Anna De Fina, Didem Ikizoglu & Jeremy Wegner (eds.), *Diversity and superdiversity: Sociocultural linguistic perspectives (GURT Series)*, 1–15. Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic interactionism: Perspectives and method*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Blumer, Herbert. 2004. *George Herbert mead and human conduct* (ed. Thomas Morriane). Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.

- Cicourel, Aaron. 1973. *Cognitive sociology: Language and meaning in social interaction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education.
- Cicourel, Aaron. 1992. The interpenetration of communicative contexts: Examples from medical encounters. In Alessandro Duranti & Charles Goodwin (eds.), *Rethinking context*, 291–310. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Duranti, Alessandro. 1997. *Linguistic anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2012. Three waves of linguistic variation: The emergence of meaning in the study of variation. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41. 87–100.
- Erving, Goffman. 1964. The neglected situation. *American Anthropologist* 66(Part 2). 133–136.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 2002. *Ethnomethodology's program: Working out Durkheim's Aphorism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra. 2017. 'Whose context collapse?' Ethical clashes in the study of language and social media in context. *Applied Linguistics Review* 8(2–3). 1–32.
- Goodwin, Charles. 2007. Participation, stance and affect in the organization of practice. *Discourse and Society* 18(1). 53–73.
- Gumperz, John. 1982. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hymes, Dell. 1996. *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Karimzad, Farzad & Lydia Catedral. 2018. 'No, we don't mix languages': Ideological power and the chronotopic organization of ethnolinguistic identity. *Language and Society* 47(1). 89–113.
- Kroon, Sjaak & Jos Swanenberg (eds.). 2019. *Chronotopic identity work*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Marwick, Alice & danah Boyd. 2010. I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media and Society* 13(1). 114–133.
- Parkin, David. 2016. From multilingual classification to translingual ontology: A turning point. In Karel Arnaut, Jan Blommaert, Ben Rampton & Massimiliano Spotti (eds.), *Language and superdiversity*, 71–88. New York: Routledge.
- Rampton, Ben. 1995. *Crossing: Language and ethnicity among adolescents*. London: Longman.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1992. The indeterminacy of contextualization: When is enough enough? In Peter Auer & Aldo Di Luzio (eds.), *The contextualization of language*, 55–76. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1998. Contemporary transformations of local linguistic communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27. 401–426.
- Szabla, Malgorzata & Jan Blommaert. 2018. Does context really collapse in social media interaction? *Applied Linguistics Review* 9(4). 1–29.
- Tagg, Caroline, Philip Seargeant & Amy Brown. 2017. *Taking offence on social media: Conviviality and communication on facebook*. London: Palgrave Pivot.
- Varis, Piia & Jan Blommaert. 2015. Conviviality and collectives on social media: Virality, memes, and new social structures. *Multilingual Margins* 2(1). 31–45.
- Vitak, Jessica. 2012. The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 56(4). 451–470.
- Williams, Glyn. 1992. *Sociolinguistics: A sociological critique*. London: Longman.