Linguistic Superdiversity as a “new” theoretical framework: Panacea or nostrum?

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New Zealand sheep stop car of speeding fugitives
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A flock of sheep has come to the aid of New Zealand police, stopping a car-load of fugitives who had led officers on a high-speed chase across Central Otago. The driver, initially pulled over for speeding and having no licence plates, evaded capture for 90 minutes. The fugitives even managed to continue after road spikes deployed by officers destroyed one of their vehicle's tyres. They were finally halted by the sheep, which blocked the road entirely as they were being moved to new pasture. In a coincidence, the sheep were reported to be owned by a local police officer from Queenstown. All four fugitives were arrested.
“Superdiverse” Auckland

• Auckland is now home to **160 languages**, with multiethnic depth projected to deepen even further (cf. RSNZ, 2013; Superdiversity stocktake)

• Asian New Zealanders projected to constitute almost 30% of Auckland’s population by 2021

• 39% of Aucklanders were born overseas

• Highest numbers of multilingual speakers live in the **Auckland** region: 377,550 people (**51.2%** of all multilingual speakers in NZ)
Superdiversity as a concept

…there is much to be gained by a multi-dimensional perspective on diversity, both in terms of moving beyond ‘the ethnic group as either the unit of analysis or sole object of study’ … and by appreciating the coalescence of factors which conditions people’s lives. (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1026)
Linguistic superdiversity

The “multilingual turn” (May 2014)

the boundedness of speech communities, the stability, linearity and even predictable nature of sociolinguistic variation, the linear nature of linguistic and sociolinguistic evolution; [even] the autonomy and boundedness of language itself … have now been replaced by a default image of openness, dynamics, multifiliari and nonlinear development… (Blommaert, 2013, pp.13-14)
• Makoni & Pennycook (2012: 447) - “lingua franca multilingualism”, where
  – languages are so deeply intertwined and fused into each other that the level of fluidity renders it difficult to determine any boundaries that may indicate that there are different languages involved.

• Rampton (2011) “contemporary urban vernaculars”
• Canagarajah (2011) “codemeshing”
• Creese, Blackledge, et al. (2011) “flexible bilingualism”
• Pennycook (2010) “metrolingualism”
• García (2009) “translanguaging”
• Jørgensen (2008) “polylingual languaging”
The multilingual turn and linguistic superdiversity challenge the existing orthodoxy of monolingualism in the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

This is leading to a realignment of the field (new orthodoxies) – e.g. Blommaert (2013) advocates linguistic superdiversity as a general framework for all of sociolinguistics.

But it doesn’t subvert the ongoing contest between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and the need to avoid paradigmatic closure.
Limitation 1

• The unreflexive ethnocentrism of western sociolinguistics

• A “presentist” view of multilingualism
Limitation 2

- “Metronormativity”
- Cf.
- “ossified” rural/Indigenous “languages”
- Reinforcing the urban/rural divide
Limitation 3

Privileging individual linguistic agency

Vs.

Ongoing “linguistic hierarchies of prestige” (Liddicoat, 2013)

• Migrants as the (only) stakeholders

• “Linguistic environment” (Grin et al., 2015)
Limitation 4

Parole vs. Langue (still a dichotomy)

Quotidian multilingual language use

Vs.

Access to standardized language varieties
Paradigmatic “superdiversity”

The (new) perspective that enables us not just to analyze the messy contemporary stuff, but also to re-analyze and re-interpret more conventional and older data, now questioning the fundamental assumptions (almost inevitably language-ideological in character) previously used in [sociolinguistic] analysis. (Blommaert, 2015)
Complex diversity

• Kraus (2012)
• MIME (Mobility and Inclusion in Multilingual Europe)
• An understanding of language use that includes all actors in modern (post-)national contexts
• A non-essentialist understanding of language that addresses the reciprocity of the individual/collective nexus via culturally grounded contexts of praxis
• An approach that never loses sight of wider structural inequalities, access, inclusion and exclusion
• Cf. Flores & Lewis (2015)
Implications

• Both epistemological and methodological

• From ignoring to co-opting?

• Addressing positionality and power dynamics

• Avoiding superdiversity as the new (northern) hegemony
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Selected References


