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Sociolinguistic regimes across an asylum-seeking centre: L2 learners doing togetherness via a socio-technological platform

1. Introduction

In as much as there is nobody who knows his/her language perfectly in its entirety, there is also nobody who is *stricto sensu* monolingual. Multilingualism, therefore, always has been and still is part of our *conditio humana*. Multilingualism, however, has also landed in a 21st century that sees it as the cause of highly controversial societal debates on language, nation, belonging, inequality and the paranoia of grouping. On the one hand, in fact, we have one macroscopic group of individuals which is more favoured by migration authorities. This macro group is made up of those mobile individuals who are often addressed as expats and/or knowledge migrants. These people turn out to be deeply entrenched in (digitally) mediated communication; they appear to enhance their social relations networks through digital means and are able to participate in society through digital literacy skills that allow them to be part of multiple overlapping transnationally networked webs of socialisation. On the other hand, we find another macroscopic group of people. This time, though, the group is made up of those individuals who enjoy less fortunate conditions of mobility, e.g. manual labour migrant workers, asylum seekers, illegal refugees, digitally illiterate migrants. They tend to find their identities being relegated into essentialist identity category frames like that of 'newcomers', 'in need of civic integration' and excluded in that 'unschooled' or 'illiterate' and 'in need of (digital) literacy skills'.

Before proceeding with the main topic of this paper, that is, before examining the lives and literacy doings of those people who fall into the second macroscopic group presented above, I wish to provide the reader with a snapshot of current trends in the study of language and contemporary globally networked societies. From there, I will move on to present some empirical data from an ethnographic interpretive study on the negotiation of sociolinguistic regimes across the spaces of an asylum-seeking centre located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. I conclude by considering whether the category of 'L2 learner in need of integration' is a valid category for addressing the guests at the centre or whether socio-technological platforms like the one presented here do hold a transformative potential that allows digitally literate mobile subjects who were homogeneously relegated to the category of 'L2 learners in need of civic integration' to move beyond this homogenising categorisation.

2. Toward an understanding of language and contemporary globally networked societies

Let us begin with the following statement: the assemblage of what makes things and people within a given socio-cultural space all tick together in the way they do, e.g. what we would vulgarly call society, is an extremely hard thing to understand. This is even harder when language and what people do with it are left out. In contrast, following the scientification of the study of language in the late nineteenth century, linguists themselves learnt to abandon society and focus on 'language' alone. *In concreto*, this meant that those interested in language would have channelled much, if not all, of their attention on the phenomenological, morphological and syntactic structures that make up 'a language'. The consequences of this selective attention, in turn, have been the isolation of the study of language from its societal use. More specifically, it has caused a divide between the study of language forms and the consequent mapping of these forms onto specific functions and, through that, to the construction of social meaning. Yet again, while societal change and ideological stances were paid little attention in early sociolinguistic theory building, sociolinguistics could not escape the fact that any language problem is concomitant with a social problem, and that we ought to pay attention to the microfabrics of the social if the study of language wishes to have any form of valid societal implications.

Contrasting with this rather opaque canvas depicting language and society as odd bedfellows, the study of language and society and, more precisely, of language as social practice is much indebted to the work of Joshua Fishman (1969) and to the later developments introduced by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (Gumperz 1971; Gumperz/Hymes (eds.) 1964). Building on Fishman's work (1971), we see that the basis for the sociology of language rests on the foundation of the use of language in concomitance with the social organisation of behaviour. It is, again, thanks to Fishman that, from a descriptive sociology of language whose basic task was to show how social networks and speech communities do not display either the same language usage or the same behaviour toward language, scholars have moved toward a more dynamic sociology of language. The main goal of the latter has been to unravel both why and how two once similar networks or communities have arrived at quite a different social organisation of language use and have quite a different behaviour toward language, whether factual or ideological. Although Fishman's dynamic approach to the sociology of language touches on the issue of repertoire change, much of his initial work remains anchored to a sociolinguistics of spread, stable and unstable bilingualism and the construction and revision of writing systems.

It is with the work of John Gumperz that the study of language and society underwent a total reshaping. From his early work on linguistic relativity to his later work on the linguistic base of social inequality, immersed in the massive

linguistic variety that surrounded him during fieldwork on the Indian subcontinent, Gumperz found that individuals used language differently. More specifically, in the work that was seminal for the discussion of the concept of a "speech community" (1968), Gumperz showed that while a named language was a category for those who studied language, it was not so for language users. Starting with communicative practices, functions and repertoires, rather than focusing on structuralist grammatical systems, Gumperz found that the study of language went beyond approaches that questioned how linguistic knowledge is structured in systematic ways. Rather, the core notions in Gumperz's approach to the study of language became interpretation, understanding, meaning and, with that, meaning making while engaged in interaction. This, I am sure you will agree, required a new level of sociolinguistic analysis that helped us to better grasp social communication (Gumperz 1971, 343). In so doing, Gumperz proposed a sociolinguistic analysis that had as its focal point how interpretation and understanding, rather than 'language', are intertwined with the construction of shared common ground (fully developed in his 1982 book on sociolinguistics and interpersonal communication). So while Gumperz's earlier work was indeed linked to the beginnings of sociolinguistics and particularly to the establishment of what became known as the "ethnography of communication" (1986), his later work focused on interactional sociolinguistics. This became a forerunner of the Silverstinian 'total linguistic fact' (2003) that, as Wortham has it, when dealing with the total linguistic fact, includes the analysis of *form*, *use*, *ideology* and *domain* (Wortham 2008, 83). Consequently, the results of a Gumperzian approach to interactional sociolinguistics and, more generally, to the study of language and society add up to an approach to social interaction through language. In short, Gumperz pointed to shared experience, uptake and contextualisation cues (see also De Mauro et al. (eds.) 1988) as a prerequisite for shared interpretation. Thus, in contrast to a perspective that saw multilinguals as being cognitively deficitarian, Gumperz posited that the pervasive phenomena related to multilingualism were to be noticed everywhere.

The conceptual, intellectual and empirical itinerary that has been outlined so far also needs to stop off, albeit briefly, at another "sacred monster" of contemporary sociolinguistics, Dell Hymes. In Hymes' work, language is formed in, by and for social, cultural and political contexts, with injustice and social hierarchy on the one hand juxtaposing human agency and creativity on the other. There is, for Hymes, nothing "mechanical" about the production and reproduction of discourses and, through them, texts, institutions or cultures. What were formerly understood by structural linguists as different languages could be different language varieties, with their attached values of inequality in societal arenas, and what an analysis of language features could do would be to either designate or highlight lexical or phonological styles that made up varieties of the same language. Gumperz and Hymes defined a linguistic-anthropological tradition, the foundations and assumptions of which have tended to develop in parallel with mainstream socio-

linguistics in the Labovian-Fishmanian tradition. In this linguistic-anthropological tradition, a gradual deconstruction of the notion of "language" itself happened, "language" as a unified (Chomskyan) concept being "chopped up" and reconfigured, as it were, into a far more layered and fragmented concept of "communication", with functions far broader than just the transmission of denotational meaning (cf. Hymes 1996). A glance at current sociolinguistic debates would have us charmed by another striking phenomenon as well. That is, we see an unprecedented proliferation of terms, although some would define it "barren verbiage" (Makoni 2012), for the study of multilingualism. We find 'language' often accompanied by the terms 'mobility' and 'globalisation'. We further find prefixes like 'super' in concomitance with words like 'vernaculars' and prefixes like 'poly' in concomitance with verbs (often in the gerund) like 'poly'-languaging, understood as the study of how people make use of diverse resources present in their personal linguistic and spatial repertoires (see Jørgensen et al. 2011). This happens without regard for the socio-cultural boundaries of named languages; thus it trespasses on those political and language ideological *doxa* of a language as a bounded entity, applied during communicative acts. These linguistic and spatial repertoires – both online and offline – are essentially multimodal: people do not only use language in its written and oral forms. Rather, they also point, gesture, sign, tap, meme and mash up language on their screens in a variety of combinations. It is, therefore, the re-evaluated notion of sociolinguistic repertoires (Spotti/Blommaert 2017) and, within that, of spatially organised digital sociolinguistic repertoires that serves our purpose here. That is, it serves as an entry ticket into understanding how people who fall into categories such as 'L2 learners in need of integration' or 'digitally incompetent people' manage to negotiate and contrast overt and covert sociolinguistic regimes that have them fall into these comprehensive categories of abnormality.

3. The asylum-seekers' centre as a heavily languagised space

When building on the notion of what I call here 'spatially organised digital sociolinguistic repertoires', we can frame these as the array of possibilities and constraints that someone owns and that someone deploys in order to have his/her voice understood by others (see Blommaert 2005 but also Busch 2017). As we have learned from the recent work of Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese (2018) as well as from the fine-grained multimodal ethnographic work carried out by Adami (2018) across two major covered market places in the UK, sociocultural spaces are no sociolinguistic and multimodal *vacua*. Rather, every sociocultural space sees in itself the presence of overlapping polycentric (digital yet tangible) networks of practice. It also sees the presence of (digital) transactional

exchanges, i.e. when someone pays for a certain transaction with their mobile phone, the array of skills they have to employ is evident, to say nothing of verbal and screen-based interactions. A focus on people's own sociolinguistic repertoires deployed within a (digital) socio-cultural space therefore allows us to track down how and why particular resources come to be used in a specific interactional moment and how these might shift and change throughout the day and over the spaces someone comes to inhabit within the same institution. The asylum-seeking centre at hand will serve as my case in point here. Here, in fact, I will examine how spatially organised digital sociolinguistic repertoires become a *locus* for negotiating and trespassing on sociolinguistic norms in a heavily institutionally languagised environment where norms of sociolinguistic behaviour are enforced through both overt and covert language policy measures.

3.1 The setting of this study

Our setting now is an asylum seeking centre located in rather a remote part of Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and run by the Red Cross. At the time of data collection, October 2013, the centre was practically full, with 67 out of a maximum capacity of 69 'guests', as 'guest' was the appellative used by the centre's assistants when addressing the people residing there. During the fieldwork, my role was that of the ethnographer interested in the guests' daily doings. My research focus was, in fact, rather broad and can be summed up as follows: I was trying to unravel what it means to be a transnational asylum-seeking migrant in a digitally networked society. My presence at the centre was – as the guests made known to me – a great source of inspiration and even of happiness at times. They felt, in fact, inspired to share their stories and show me their daily doings as finally they had found someone who genuinely cared about their lives and what they had to tell because I was neither a figure of authority about to judge the truthfulness of their stories nor a centre assistant. Like at every Red Cross centre, the obligations toward the guests and their well-being were rather basic. The centre, in fact, only had the institutional obligation to give them a roof over their heads, a bed to sleep on and food for their daily sustenance. Activities aimed at introducing the guests to the norms and values of mainstream Flemish society, for example, do not fall under the basic system of provisions offered by the centre. Nonetheless, the centre's directors and its personnel all saw it as a place which was the first opportunity for their guests to mingle with the community. As a result, a number of activities had been set up, including the possibility of having sewing lessons, the chance to grow their own vegetables and exchange them at the local market, and learning Dutch as an L2 once a week for 90 minutes.

No explicit notice at the centre mentioned that Dutch had to be used as the only language of interaction among guests and assistants. Although the sociolinguistic landscape present on the centre's walls displayed an array of languages

and scripts known to the guests, it was a recurrent sociolinguistic practice to hear the sentence *'in het Nederlands, alsjeblijft'* ('in Dutch please'). This happened mostly when guests went to the office asking for something that could have ranged from information about appointments with their lawyers to asking for food that they had bought and that had been stored in the communal fridge at the centre. Should the interaction be too hard for the guests, then it would have been the turn of English, first, and French, second, to be used during the exchange, with maybe a tokenistic use of Russian or Farsi for ritual exchanges like greetings or thanking one another. The episodes that follow instead focus on two spaces that I singled out during my fieldwork as being relevant for understanding how the straight categories of 'in need of integration' and 'digitally unskilled' into which the guests fell came to be challenged. The first space is the activity room, a large space in which several voluntary based activities would take place, including the Dutch as an L2 classroom which is key to the first part of our story. The second place is what I called 'the three steps' in my fieldwork notes, i.e. three steps at the dead end of the main corridor in the centre. It is precisely by sitting on those three steps, where guests often came with their mobile phones, that the best Wi-Fi connection could be found.

3.2 Zerolingual – multilingual

The teaching of Dutch as an L2 at the centre was carried out by Miss Frida, an elderly retired lady with a background in teaching. Her commitment to the centre has spanned more than 12 years by now and she claims to enjoy what she does, given that at her age "there are people who like to drink coffee while I like people, so that's why I do it" (Interview Frida 10102013:1). Once a week, therefore, Miss Frida teaches Dutch as an L2 for one hour using the didactic resources that she regards as most fitting to the needs of her students, these ranging from highly to barely literate and having varying degrees of mastering Dutch. The room in which she teaches has a number of desks and a white board, where guests used to write their thoughts or poems. The students in Miss Frida's class are not – unlike in a regular classroom – compelled to attend. Rather they can walk in and out freely at any time, making sure, however, that they are no bother to those who have attended the class from the start. In what follows, I focus on a classroom episode that deals with Frida teaching Dutch vocabulary. I then move onto Frida's metapragmatic judgments about her students' sociolinguistic repertoires and literacy skills. It is October 10, 2013 and class should start at 13:00 sharp. At 13:03, the lesson opens as follows:

Armenian guy: if you find yourself […] from my room an'
Frida: Niet, vandaaggeen Engelse les he', vandag nederlandse les hey? Oke', dus we starten op bladzijde zes. Iedereen heeft een kopie?

[*No, today no English lesson, right? Today is Dutch lesson, right? Okay so we start on page six, has everyone got a copy?*]

After wiping off what had been written on the white board and sorting out her worksheets for the day, at 13:06 Miss Frida starts reading each word from the worksheet that she is holding while standing on the right-hand side of the white-board facing the whole class. The lesson unfolds with her reading out a string of words, slowly and loudly, that her students have – as drawings – on their worksheets. While she does so, she points at the words on the worksheet. She then comes to the following line:

Frida: Haan […] Jan […] lam […] tak […] een boom […]
[*Hen* […] *Jan* […] *lamb* […] *branch* […] *one tree* […]]

Frida: Oke' […] hier is Nel, hier, hier, hier, hi[ii]er, hier is Nel. Nel is naam, naam voor vrow, Fatima, Nel, Leen, naam voor vrouw.
[*Okay, here we have Nel, here, here, here, h*[*ee*]*re is Nel. Nel is name, name for woman, Fatima, Nel, Leen, name for woman*]

Armenian guy: Waarom naam voor vrouw mitz zu [uh] klein leter?
[*Why is name for woman with small cap?*]

Frida: Dat is basis nederlands, BASIS [Frida onderstreep dit met een hardere toon]. Eerst starten wij met de basis,wij lopen niet! Wij stappen […]na stappen, wij stappen vlucht, daarna gaan wij lopen, dus nu stappen wij [...] maar dat is juist.
[*That is basic Dutch, BASIC* [*Frida stresses this with a higher tone of voice*]. *First we start with the basics, we don't walk, we make steps, after making steps, we step faster, and then we get walking, so now we make steps* […] *though, that is right.*]

Miss Frida, whose aim was to increase the vocabulary breadth and – later on – the vocabulary depth of her Dutch L2 students, is reading aloud clusters of monosyllabic words for them to match a word to a picture as given on the worksheet. It is interesting to the note the way in which Frida states that in this class there is no English lesson going on that day, de-legitimising the use of English and stressing this boundary through the use of the tag "hey" (01). In line (04), Frida further stimulates other learning channels to make her students understand what the locative pronoun "here" (hier) means. She repeats the word, stressing the [r] at the end and the length of the vowel. She also points to the place on the ground where she is standing. Interestingly enough, the lesson snapshot above sees one of her students (who is from Armenia) asking a question that, although posed with the intent to mock the teacher's authority, is also meant to show that he has literacy skills. Frida's reply is very telling for two reasons. She first reiterates firmly how she sees the learning of Dutch, using the metaphor of "we don't walk, we make steps, after making steps, we step faster, and then we get walking, so now we make steps". Secondly, through the adversative clause that ends her sentence in

line (06) – "but that is correct" – she has to give up her native speaker authority, admitting that the student's observation was actually valid. In the retrospective interview carried out with her so as to gather information on her professional life as well as to understand what she thought she was doing while she was teaching, Frida asserted:

'*Ja, als je gaat naar die landen eh, dat is alles met handen en voeten eh daar en hier is ook zo een beetje.*'
(Yes, if you go to those places, right, it is all hands and feet, right, and here is also a little bit like that).

She then added:

'*Kijk, deze mensen hebben verschillende talen, echt mooi talen hoor, maar ze zijn eigenlijk geen talen, snap je wat ik bedoel*?'
(Look these people have languages, really beautiful languages, but they are not languages really, if you know what I mean?).

In her answers, there is a conceptualisation of her L2 students through the lens of the homogeneous 'other', coming – through the use of the distancing demonstrative 'those places' – from somewhere far away, like the countries that she admitted having visited once when she went on holiday. Second, she transposes the communication barriers that she encountered there by the other, where she had to communicate using her hands and feet, as she put it, to the situation that she has experienced in her class, although many of her students have reported that they speak – to different degrees of proficiency – an array of languages. Further, we encounter in her discourse practices, the disqualification of her students' languages. To her, 'these people', i.e. her students, do have languages, entities that she qualifies as "really beautiful languages" but then she adds an adversative clause 'but they are not languages', followed by the adverb 'really'. This sentence allows us to take a peek into Frida's own understanding of what 'languages' are. The languages that belong to her students, in fact, do not match her, albeit unvoiced, understanding of what a language is. This meta-pragmatic judgement on the languages spoken by her students can have different explanations. Although speculative, in that Frida did not go more deeply into her rationale behind 'what a language is' during the retrospective interview, it may be that she does not address the languages of her students as actual 'languages' as they are not European languages. This comes across as being peculiar, however, in that most of her students reported that they were proficient in English, German, Russian or French, languages which are either reminiscent of the colonial past that characterised their countries of origin or those which they encountered during their migration trajectory to Flanders (see Spotti 2016). Another reason for her judgement could be a disqualification of their sociolinguistic repertoires, in that the languages that are present in her class are anything but Dutch.

3.3 Doing togetherness through YouTube

The second ethnographic vignette involves two young men residing at the centre, Urgesh and Wassif. While Urgesh claims to be of Bengali origin and – as he reports – has some level of proficiency in Bengali, Punjabi and Urdu as well as in English and 'beetje beetje Nederlands' (a tiny bit of Dutch), Wassif reports being of Afghani origin. As he had worked for the Red Cross in Afghanistan, he is proficient in English. He reported knowing and using Farsi and Arabic (in its classical variety) as well as some Dutch. The two of them had grown fond of me, during my stay at the centre. They had understood that I was not an institutional figure neither interested in their identities or in scolding them if they did not behave appropriately. Rather, in the evening, they would always insist on talking to me about their reasons for coming to Belgium, as well as about their expectations for their future lives there in Flanders. After telling me their stories, in English, one night during my fieldwork, they wished to show me the power of 'the steps', i.e. the three steps on the ground floor of the asylum seeking centre that were so popular with everybody for having the best possible internet connection in the whole building. As it was a quiet night, once we had moved there, they asked me whether I liked music. While telling them that I did like jazz, they wished to show me their favourite genre, heavy metal. The dialogue unfolded as follows:

Urgesh: Look at this, Sir, look at this.
Wassif: These are cool bruv, these are cool.
Urgesh: I have seen them on a gig.
Wassif: Yeah, yeah, look at that, power, broer Max, puur power.
(Asylum 2.0 fieldnotes 102013)

In the excerpt, these young men are convivially commenting on the YouTube video using their own varieties of English as the Bengali band – Sultana Bibiana – on their phone screen plays a cover version of the world-famous American band Metallica. In the above quote, several issues are at play. First, as exemplified by the absence of Dutch in the exchange, except for the use of the colloquial expression 'broer' (bruv) and 'puur' (pure), there is no trace of the language policies implemented by the centre being taken on board by the two language users. Second, in relation to their sociolinguistic repertoires, the interaction at hand implies that the interlocutors are rather proficient users of English. Last, we can also observe that they are proficient techno-literates in that they use the internet as a means to access pop-culture content (Spotti/Kurvers 2015). Although, for reasons of space, I can only provide but a glimpse of the evidence leading to the construction of conviviality taking place at the centre, I believe that the vignette is worth further consideration. Online streamed video music and, more precisely, the genre of heavy metal, was the subject of the current conversation with me but, together with streamed online porn, it had also been a topic in many of the conversations

I had overheard taking place using whatever language resources were available among the young men at the centre. Encounters around online sources of masculine popular culture taking place on the three steps always had one characteristic in common. They did not have as their pivotal point the 'big' discourses taking place around the 'heavy things' that characterise the lives of the guests at the centre, such as the societal barriers encountered with native Flemish people or with the judicial system, their future in Flanders, the pressure to learn Dutch or – a common reason for confrontation – their differing ethno-religious backgrounds. Rather they were 'light' moments of boisterous bonding. Although these insights should be taken with a pinch of linguistic ethnographic salt – as Rampton warns us (2014) – due to the risk of being blinded by addressing those 'encounters on the steps' *a priori* as convivial encounters, it could be claimed that what these 'guests' are doing on those steps results in a gathering around a socio-technological platform which – as Goebel (2015) points out in his work on knowledging and television representations – leads to moments of 'doing togetherness'. More specifically for our case here, it is a moment in which the deep tangible differences between the two or more people involved in the exchange fade into the background and where the centre of attraction is a mobile phone, its screen and the music it plays (Arnaut et al. (eds.) 2016).

4. Discussion and conclusions

There is no escaping the fact that human beings – whether engaged in migratory movement or not – are and always have been mobile subjects. There is also no escaping the fact that group dynamics – albeit functioning at a slower pace in former times – have gone through major changes since the advent of the internet and a globally networked transnational society (Castells 2010; Rigoni/Saitta (eds.) 2012; Blommaert 2014). Against this background, there is no easy way around the fact that, as Joshua Fishman pointed out in his seminal work on the sociology of language (1969), the point of departure for the study of language in society is that language, in whichever form and through whichever channel, is constantly present in the daily lives of human beings. In the emergent literature on digital literacies, online spaces and the construction of identities online, there appears to be a need to re-conceptualise the concept of a group and, for the present case, to reconceptualise the category 'L2 learner'. As Baym (2015) points out, for studies of particular websites or communication channels, like the one presented here, when the researcher is interested in how people come together around shared activities and goals, the situation pictured in the two ethnographic vignettes confronts us with a question and a few considerations that ought to be advanced. First, if these people can do conviviality and manage to integrate around digitally mediated content thanks to a global infrastructure such as an online video broad-

cast via YouTube, the question may be posed as to whether there is any purpose or even any room left for institutional top-down language policies in contexts that are characterised by globalisation-led mobility and technology. In other words, what role can top-down policies have in the lives of people who do not necessarily belong to the sociolinguistic mainstream in that they either have an indigenous minority background or a globalised migratory background? Daily we are confronted with European nation states that are capriciously engaged in authoring and authorising discourses of integration and measures for implementing the learning of the official language as the entry ticket for newly arrived migrants (see Spotti 2011). What we gather here, though, is a different picture. On the one hand, Dutch is offered in a catechistic approach that sees the 'guests' as blank slates to be filled in and where people, approaching Dutch as an L2 and as reported in Frida's words, first have to make steps before they can walk. On the other hand, other places at the centre become centres of interest, gathering places, that grant those very same guests who previously fell under the blank slate of "other category" the possibility to avoid officially imposed sociolinguistics regimes, when all this is done through the use of socio-technological platforms that trigger togetherness and, through that, conviviality.

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