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## Language and Superdiversities II

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# Super-diversity: elements of an emerging perspective

By Karel ARNAUT

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to reflect upon diversity in contemporary globalising society from within the disciplinary frontier of anthropology and sociolinguistics. Like the paper of David Parkin (infra) Arnaut's is an attempt to devise new frames of reference for the sociolinguistic study of super-diversity. Here Arnaut explores the potential of 'super-diversity' as a perspective or lens for looking at diversity as discourse and as social practice. The paper first looks into the notion of super-diversity, which marks a sea-change in the global design of transnationalism. Moreover, super-diversity seems to indicate that a new approach is needed to replace the model of orderly multiculturalism by taking into account the fluidities and complexities of diversity in the age of heightened mobility and digital communication. Second, this paper recognises that over the last two decades a hegemonic 'diversity' discourse has emerged in a 'post-panoptical' configuration of governmentality that manages these complex forms of diversity. The challenge of the super-diversity perspective is to relate to this hegemonic discourse while not losing track of the exciting dynamics of messy and creative commonplace diversity in every-day interaction and low-key cultural production. In order to perform this task, the paper proposes a 'critical sociolinguistics of diversity' that is presented as part of a new moment in the post-colonial history of the human and social sciences, almost half a century after the earlier decolonising moves by scholars such as Johannes Fabian and Dell Hymes.

## A new world of diversity?

The anthropological point of vantage is that of *a world culture* struggling to be born. As a scientist, the anthropologist both represents its embryonic possibilities and works to create it. If that culture fails, so will anthropology (Wolf 1964: 96 [my emphasis] quoted in Hymes 1972: 19 and cited again on p. 30).

The above is a key passage from Hymes's *Reinventing Anthropology* (1972), an edited volume that fostered a crisis in anthropology by questioning the discipline's societal relevance and scientific legitimacy, while raising important ethical issues related to its changing position in a new, post-colonial world. Hymes's programmatic introduction tried to lay out the basis of anthropology's reinvention within a long (Western) tradition of dealing with – describing, explaining, and managing/governing – diversity vis-à-vis universal human nature and culture (Hymes 1972: 22). Two facets of this undertaking are of particular

interest: the idea of universality-in-progress, and that of infinite diversity within a closed system.

When Hymes (1972: 34) states that it was the task of anthropology 'to establish the study of the cultural as a universal and personal dimension of human efforts toward the future', he situates the future explicitly in 'a world society' and in the on-going human quest for commonality and reciprocity through communication (idem: 35). These ideas have been rearticulated more recently by Bruno Latour as vital elements of his theory of 'compositionism'. The universality which the humanities are searching for, Latour (2010: 474) argues, is not yet 'there', 'waiting to be unveiled and discovered'. Bringing in the element of diversity, he specifies that this common world in the making will have to be built 'from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material' (2010: 474). Like

Hymes, Latour situates the general trajectory of universality in a concrete global history of uncertain unification.

For Hymes, the post-colonial world heralds the end of diversity as we know it. Diversity, he argues, should no longer be located in an ongoing trend of diversification – through dispersion and fragmentation in an ever expanding world – but in processes of *'reintegration within complex units'* (Hymes 1972: 32-33; emphasis in the original). The finite world that is evoked here resembles the one Paul Valery (1931: 11) saw as following on 'the era of free expansion' (see Birkett 2006) and which, for Wolf, radically rekeys our way of dealing with human diversity. 'For the first time in human history,' Wolf claims, 'we have transcended the inherited divisions of the human phenomenon into segments of time and segments of space' (Wolf 1964: 95). Instantly gauging the theoretical implications of this global repartitioning and the (*avant la lettre*) compression of space-time, Wolf predicts that 'no one stationary perspective will any longer exhaust the possibilities of man' (idem). Finally, he casts the newly emergent analytical gaze in terms of multiplicity and mobility:

We have left behind, once and for all, the paleotechnic age of the grounded observer who can draw only one line of sight between the object and himself. We have entered the physical and the intellectual space age, and we are now in a position to circumnavigate man, to take our readings from any point in both space and time (idem).

For Wolf this decentering of dominant segmentations and static 'points of view' requires anthropologists to discard simplicity, predictability, and stasis, and to confront the 'variability and complexity of human life' (1964: 96-97). Moreover, agility and suppleness enable anthropologists to take sides – and throw in their fate – with their interlocutors, and lay the basis for a more democratic and emancipatory science of the human life experience based on mutuality and exchange. In that respect, Wolf and, more explicitly, Hymes (1972: 39, 53, 57; 1975: 869) display a Bakhtinian susceptibility for the liberatory potential of the humanities (see Hirschkop 1986; Blommaert 2009).

Around the same time of Hymes's and Wolf's post-colonial anthropology, members of the Italian so-called autonomist 'movement of 1977' started theorising the post-Fordist condition of mass diversity ('the multitude') and its reproduction in a global environment (Virno and Hardt 1996). Among them, Antonio Negri (2008) identifies the human creative potential/energy by referring to Spinoza's notion of *potenza* (Ruddick 2010). While globalisation signifies the end of the world having 'an outside', Negri contends, *potenza* realises itself in the 'recomposition of the sensible', the 'poetic reconstruction of life from the inside' in a world that is finite and yet limitless (Negri 2008: 68-69, 239). This *potenza*, Negri (2008: 7) argues, will increasingly be realised through what he and others call immaterial labour, in which communication and the creation of 'linguistic, communicational, and affective networks are key elements'. Negri thus shares with Virno the idea that at the present stage of globalisation – whether you call it 'empire' (Hardt and Negri 2000) or 'post-Fordism' (Virno 2004), or as we shall see presently 'post-modernism' – the means of production consist to an increasing extent of communicative techniques, procedures and competencies (Virno 2004: 61).

From the early 1990s onwards, post-modernist theorists have equally tried to come to terms with human agency and creativity in a 'finite yet limitless' world. In Zygmunt Bauman's seminal text, this world is epitomised by the 'habitat' that 'offers the agency the sum-total of resources for all possible action as well as the field inside which the action-orienting and action-oriented relevancies may be plotted, the habitat is the territory inside which both freedom and dependency of the agency are constituted ...' (Bauman 1991: 36). Subsequently, Bauman characterises this new habitat as complex and highly unpredictable, not in the least because of its polycentric character, there being 'no goal setting agency with overall managing and coordinating capacities or ambitions'. Within this habitat he situates the processes of self-assembly (close to Virno's notion of 'individuation') or contingent, inconclusive self-constitution and stresses how much

they depend on the availability and accessibility of resources (= 'tokens for self-assembly') (Bauman 1991: 36-40). In a later text, Bauman (1996: 18) summarises the finite nature yet the inexhaustible possibilities of these processes by saying, 'the catchword of modernity was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling.'

Finally, Bauman (1991: 46) conceives of the researcher 'as participant [...] of this never ending, self-reflexive process of reinterpretation [...]. In practice, [...] a clarifier of interpretative rules and facilitator of communication; this will amount to the replacement of the dream of the legislator with the practice of an interpreter.' Perhaps because of Bauman's focus on issues of communication and semiotisation, Rampton (2006: 12-16) engages with several of Bauman's key points in order to start mapping out his own sociolinguistics of late modernity. As I hope will become clear, the present paper shares some of these aspirations.

This paper is an attempt to reflect upon diversity in contemporary globalising society from the disciplinary frontier of anthropology and sociolinguistics embodied in the section above by scholars such as Hymes, Wolf, and Bakhtin. This reflection is meant to generate elements for elaborating 'super-diversity'. While this notion has the ambition of summarising the new guise of diversity in this age of complex transnationalism, it has the potential, I argue, of becoming a perspective or lens with which to look at diversity as social practice, of course, but also as discourse. This I wish to do in three steps.

### Overview

In the first section I briefly look into the notion of super-diversity. The latter wants to mark a new historical condition of transnationalism stemming from the fact that the global flows of people have been undergoing profound quantitative and qualitative changes since the late 1980's. Apart from marking a sea-change in the global design of transnationalism, super-diversity also indicates that a new approach is needed to replace the inadequate model of multiculturalism by taking into account the fluidity and intricacies of the new diversity in the age of heightened mobility

and transnational communication. In the second, I explore the ways in which a hegemonic diversity discourse has emerged over the last two decades. This paper explores the breadth and depth of this discourse and situates it in a configuration of governmentality that it identifies as post-panoptical. This leads to the question of how super-diversity can relate to this hegemonic diversity discourse while not losing track of the exciting dynamics of commonplace diversity in every-day interaction and low-key cultural production.

In the third section, I argue for the concept of super-diversity to foster a 'critical sociolinguistics of diversity' which pursues (a) a sustained critical analysis of the emergent hegemonic diversity discourses as well as 'older', residual but still competing discourses of multiculturalism or multilingualism, while (b) addressing the way diversity in combination with transnationality is being shaped and reworked in language use and communicative practices. The latter's study, I argue, demands a radical ethnographic openness in order to deal with the unpredictability as well as the transient and emergent nature of these practices, networks, and spaces. This combination of ethnographic openness and a keen awareness of hegemonic dynamics situates the critical sociolinguistics of diversity as part of a new moment in the post-colonial history of the human and social sciences, almost half a century after the earlier decolonising moves by the likes of Johannes Fabian and Dell Hymes.

### First step: gauging super-diversity's theoretical Umwelt

The concept of super-diversity marks the new condition of transnationalism since the late 1980s and arguably accounts for the 'reintegration within complex units' to which it gave rise. Already in its earliest definitions, super-diversity (Vertovec 2006) linked major geopolitical changes, notably the end of the Cold War, with the rise of new migration flows and the diversification of migration patterns and practices worldwide. This diversification applies not only to the range of migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries, but also to the socio-economic, cultural, religious, and linguistic profiles of the migrants as well as

to their civil status and their migration trajectories. In contrast, the pre-1990 (and mainly post-WWII) labour or elite migrations to Europe were conceived as transparent and orderly because the migrants stemmed from a limited number of countries – from Mediterranean ‘labour reservoirs’ or former colonies in Africa and Asia – and had rather similar socio-economic, cultural, religious, or linguistic backgrounds (Blommaert 2011; Parkin and Arnaut 2012). The diversity following these post-war migrations was conceived and indeed governed and managed as a ‘multiculturalist’ constellation of regimented ethno-cultural segments (Hall 2000: 209). Although it had always been contested, by the 1990s this system of governance, according to Hall, was close to its ultimate demise, playing as it was against ‘the reconfiguration of social forces and relations across the globe’ (ibid.: 212).

Post-1990s transnationalism presented a different picture altogether and is, in the words of Vertovec (2007b: 1024), ‘a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade.’ Concurrently, super-diversity scorns the false transparency and neatness of ‘multiculturalism’ – a concept or set of policies whose pluralism Vertovec (2010: 90) aptly characterises as legitimising ‘a retreat into culturally and physically separate minority communities.’

In its sustained critique of multiculturalism, one may sense super-diversity’s aspiration to pass from being merely a ‘summary term’ to becoming an emergent approach or a perspective (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010; Vertovec 2010; Blommaert and Rampton 2011). An important step in this direction consists in inventorying the many variables of present-day transnationality in order to grasp ‘their scale, historical and policy-produced multiple configuration and mutual conditioning’ (Vertovec 2007b: 1026). This could form the basis of ‘calculi’ or topographies of diversity variables and their intersections. Here it becomes obvious how ‘simultaneity’ is potentially an important element

of the emergent perspective of super-diversity. Apart from being constitutive of super-diversity, simultaneity also catches the imagination of the human and social sciences, and thus serves to embed the former in the latter – as I will presently try to do.

The notion of simultaneity is built into that of super-diversity by Vertovec’s observations concerning multiple belongings in diasporic configurations (Vertovec 2007a: 34) or by referring to other authors who observed that people ‘can engage in multiple transnational processes at the same time’, hence the need to ‘explore how transnational practices and processes in different domains relate to and inform one’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004: 1028). Sociolinguists have also been engaging with the notion of simultaneity, for instance, in connection with multi-membership in different communities of practice (Barton and Tusting 2006: 97; and see Wenger 2000), the co-presence of a multiplicity of communicative channels, from face-to-face to mass media (Jacquemet 2005: 217) or the co-presence of different languages or codes in the same word or segment (Woolard 1998) as well as in code-switching which, according to Rampton (1995: 278) functions as a kind of ‘double vision’, an ‘interaction between co-present thoughts’ or a ‘transaction between contexts’. The existing toolkit of sociolinguistics appears rather well-equipped to deal with phenomena of space-time compression (Blommaert 2010; Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Coupland 2010; Vigouroux 2008).

The transidiomatic practices and communicative recombinations which Jacquemet (2005), for instance, maps out across genres, media, and transnational public spaces, acutely indicate how people operate in multiple layers of identification (Alim 2009: 104). Simultaneity, in other words, helps us to look at migratory or diasporic spaces as spatialisations of time, that is, as successive palimpsests of multiple trajectories (see Massey 2001: 259). That is where the popular notion of scale often comes in, consciously or not, conceived as part of a production process of ‘gestalts of scale’ (or glocal scalar fixes) in states or cities by unequal groups (see e.g. Swyngedouw 1997). Two recent cases demonstrate how a sca-

lar approach to cities elicits urban fragmentation even at a very micro-level. Blommaert (2012) and Van Dijk (2011) both look into very similar diasporic hot spots – globalisation gateways in train station neighbourhoods in Antwerp and The Hague, respectively. Against ‘methodological urbanism’ Van Dijk (2011: 121) stresses that what goes for neighbourhoods does not necessarily apply to cities as a whole, given the fragmented and unequally transnationalised nature of the global city. In his linguistic landscaping research Blommaert (2012: 124) goes so far as to observe ‘“layered simultaneity” both in single signs as repositories and “nexuses” of complex and “synchronized” histories, and in the neighborhood at large.’

Ultimately, the analysis of complex simultaneity also directs attention to the spatiality and, perhaps paradoxically, the diachronicity of transnational processes in virtual environments. Here, the sheer speed and geographical reach of Internet communication may compress but does not eliminate time and space. The speed at which resources on the Internet circulate, are reworked or resemiotised and rechanneled, demands a conceptualisation in terms of simultaneity as layered traces of short-term communicative actions (Leppänen and Peuronen 2012). In studies of political protest or social movements, the concept of ‘scale’ has been used to map out the transfer of resources across scales, that is, across publics of different reach both transversally (widespread mobilisation) and hierarchically (more high-up, power-laden zones) (Howitt 1993; Arnaut 2005; see Marston 2000: 222). Following a decade or so of intense popularity, the notion of scale is currently under heavy attack, more particularly its conceptualisation as (a) a territorial container and (b) a geographical hierarchy of everyday power relations. In their critiques Moore (2008) and Marston, Jones and Woodward (2005) argue against scales as pre-given, horizontally bounded, and vertically or hierarchically ordered so as to open space for the dynamics of rescaling in social and discursive practices of activism, networking, neighbourhood building, etc. I will come back to this later, when situating this in a ‘critical sociolinguistics of diversity’.

Whether we measure this in terms of scales or not, simultaneity reaches ‘down’ to the level of the individual, or rather, the ‘dividual’ and ‘upwards’ to that of the globe. Starting with the former, it is noteworthy how, apart from post-modernism, post-colonial critiques of identity and diversity (indeed colonial multiculturalism) have also embraced models of identification and multiplex subjectivities. Commenting on post-modern models of ‘dividuality’, Bennett (1999: 605) claims they see ‘persona’ of the same individual move ‘between a succession of “site-specific” gatherings and engage in “multiple identifications” while producing a self which can no longer be simplistically theorized as unified.’ From a post-colonial perspective, Englund argues that:

multiplicity is not so much a feature of a post-colony that comprises several distinct ‘cultures’ or ‘communities’ than of post-colonial subjectivity that accommodates multiple identities within a single subject. Complex relations cross cut each other as persons belong to this or that church, swear allegiance to one or another ethnic group, belong to a secret society and a political party, are business partners as well as civil servants, and so on (Englund 2004: 14).

In his writings on the post-colony Mbembe elaborates a persona-like model of the post-colonial subject and its tactics of ‘impersonation’ in diverse settings (Mbembe 1992; Mbembe and Roitman 1997). In the context of post-Apartheid South Africa he extends this claim to ‘the world’ as ‘a multiplicity of worlds’ whose ‘unity is the mutual sharing and exposition of all its worlds – within this world’ (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004: 351).

In conclusion, the contrast between multiculturalism and super-diversity is perhaps best theorised by Deleuze (with reference to Foucault) in the distinction between disciplinary and control societies, and more specifically between moulds and modulations. For Deleuze (1992), the post-modern crisis is the crisis of plurality of neat divisions which he calls enclosures or moulds. Such moulds can best be understood as compartments in Bentham’s panopticon (as remodelled by Foucault) in which a subject’s conduct is shaped, cast or moulded. In contrast, in so-called

post-panoptical systems, subjects engage in controls as modulations: they are constantly open ('on') for calibrations or alignments in variable directions (see Fraser 2003; and Bauman 2000: 11 for post-panopticon). Cheney-Lippold (2011) shows how this control society manifests itself in a broad range of surveillance schemes (ranging from CCTV to GPS-traceable mobile phones), checks and feedbacks (administrative or commercial), mostly through ICT and often based on government or corporate databases:

And modulation [creates] not individuals but endlessly sub-dividable 'dividuals'. These dividuals [...] the recipients through which power flows as subjectivity takes a deconstructed dive into the digital era. [...] dividuals can be seen as those data that are aggregated to form unified subjects, of connecting dividual parts through *arbitrary closures* at the moment of the compilation of a computer program or at the result of a database query (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 169; my emphasis).

It is far beyond the scope of this paper to expand on modulation theory and on profiling as subjectification. It suffices to realise that once one starts exploring the theoretical habitat in which super-diversity is both intelligible and relevant, one realises that individuality and diversity are key-zones of broader systems for ordering and regulating societies at different levels (simultaneously). In other words, when dealing with models of global and local diversity and how they are imagined as evolving over time, it is difficult to steer clear of 'discourse' and 'governmentality'. One of the critical issues identified so far, by looking at super-diversity through the lens of simultaneity and, hence, scalarity, is the degree of openness, flexibility and thus novelty that 'reintegration within complex units' affords. What seems to return continuously is the seemingly paradoxical combination which Hymes and Wolf foregrounded by characterising post-colonial late modernity as unfolding in a 'finite and yet limitless' universe. Stated otherwise, do we solve this paradox by directing our attention to the finite resources and categories with which one starts off (but when?) or to the limitless outcomes of their interplay? This indeed seems to be at stake when looking at diversity

in a governmentality configuration, which, for want of a better term, I label post-panoptical.

### **Second step: delving into diversity discourses – 'diversity' and 'counter-diversity'**

In a recent paper, Steven Vertovec (Vertovec 2012) explores the swift rise of what he calls 'diversity' (in quotation marks) – 'discourses about diversity' – the worldwide upsurge of which is resulting in the ubiquity of diversity in the 'policies, programmes, campaigns and strategies' of private corporations, public institutions, civil society organisations, etc. Vertovec's pungent analysis reveals not only (a) the breadth of 'differences' that comprise 'diversity', but also (b) the extent to which diversity discourses, policies and practices penetrate the lives of people and groups of people.

- (a) Over the last decade, the number of diversity categories that are taken into account has soared and now ranges from the classics (such as race, gender, ethnicity, and social class) to less obvious and far more open-ended ones such as opinions and beliefs, backgrounds and experiences. Most revealing in this respect are the expectations of Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the US Census Bureau, who sees two possible outcomes of the rising complexity and uncertainty of diversity profiling. For Prewitt, the unlikely prospect is that measurements of difference will become ever more fine-grained, while the more likely one is a melt-down of the measurement system as we know it (Vertovec 2012: 289-290).
- (b) When presenting what he calls the different facets of 'diversity', Vertovec (2012: 296-301) demonstrates compellingly how the latter permeates the everyday political, economic, affective, and civil lives of people as it gains prominence in mechanisms of redistribution and recognition, in systems of representation and organisation as much as in calibrating the provision of public services and in co-directing companies' production and sales strategies.

Taking these two observations together, we may seem to be heading towards a situation in which

'diversity' gains immense presence and authority in management and governance worldwide, but at the same time pays the price of its success by losing transparency and calculability. One way of resolving this conundrum is arguing that the infinitesimal finesse of diversity could drive a potentially flexible system of expression and control. If that is the case, 'diversity' may be productively approached as a(n emergent) discourse in the Foucaultian sense of the word: as an attractor of individual and collective ideas, words and actions, scattered in corporate policies and civil society activism, scaffolding the modernity of nation-states and the future of cities, driving individual consumer patterns and collective claims for recognition and redistribution. Attributing to 'diversity' the status of a (dominant) discourse is not an end in itself and has certain heuristic advantages. First of all, one realises that 'diversity' is more than a collection of ideas and (action) models concerning all sorts of differences, rather it is a widely spread, globally recognisable and legitimate discursive space in which people from very unequal positions imagine, formulate, and work on their individual and collective identities. However, diversity discourses are essentially local – very much in the same sense that 'global English' is local (Pennycook 2007) – and cannot be safely taken as more or less close offshoots of more global versions. For each locality the topography of its diversity discourses, constitutive of its very local 'diversity', must be mapped out. In all, such a conceptualisation of 'diversity' challenges us to consider to what an extent 'super-diversity' is academia's contribution to 'diversity' in mapping out the relevant differences and their intersections. Or could 'super-diversity' possess more of a critical potential?

The first steps which this section proposes for exploring such critical potential are: (a) looking (very briefly) into a comparable case of dominant discourse, namely that of 'development', a now largely residual discourse which widely dominated understandings of the 'global south' during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and (b) trying to situate 'diversity' in a broader frame of reference, which, for want of a better term, I call the post-panopticon, arguably an emerging

discourse which tries to grasp the complexity and multiplicity of communication and interaction in such exemplarily translocal spaces such as cities and cyberspaces.

**Development.** One notorious instance of anthropologists spotting a dominant discourse while trying to estimate its global magnitude and pervasiveness dates back to the 1990s and concerned 'development', 'that twentieth-century global project' according to one of its main critics, James Ferguson (1997), who elsewhere characterised it as 'a dominant problematic' or an 'interpretive grid' for dealing with the non-industrialised non-Western countries (Ferguson 1994: xiii). Like 'diversity', 'development' can be taken as a discourse for positioning or mapping 'otherness'. With reference to the previous point about expansion and integration, 'development' fits an expansive universe, with others 'out there' progressing in all sorts of ways, rapidly or slowly, while 'diversity' rather suits an integrating pluri-universe in which so many social, cultural, linguistic, etc. trajectories intersect. Furthermore, the comparison of 'diversity' and 'development' raises issues which cannot be dealt with in any detail here, but which help us elicit some of 'diversity's' main features. These issues concern normativity, hegemony and efficacy.

As far as normativity is concerned, 'development' presumes a sense of direction (a *telos*) while 'diversity' appears less driven than floating, more 'bricolage' than 'engineering'. However, that does not preclude 'diversity' from featuring in global hegemonies. With regard to hegemony, a question once formulated by Escobar and Ferguson vis-à-vis 'development' can be asked of 'diversity': Is 'diversity' not another attempt by the centre, the site of privilege named 'the West', to structure/regiment 'the rest', its others, through the diacritics of their differences or 'fragmented otherness'? After the disorientation and fragmentation (or 'decomposition') of modernity – say 'development' –, according to Ferguson (2005), these 'others' have come to realise that when it comes to creating new life chances, changing the dynamics ('developing') of their places (the global south) is less effectual

than changing places (migrating) altogether. Correspondingly, while 'development' was essentially geared towards managing the other from a distance – or even keeping the other at a distance, 'diversity' rather deals with the (immigrated) other within.

Finally, the issue of efficacy – of whether these discourses are able to bring about real changes – seems pertinent. In the case of 'development', Ferguson argued that development projects do not need to be successful in attaining their goals, what matters are the windows of opportunity they create for (powerful) stakeholders, such as local or national authorities, transnational agencies, etc., who can pursue political goals under the veil of socio-economic development – hence Ferguson's labelling of 'development' as 'the anti-politics machine'. A similar question is asked by Vertovec (2012: 304) with regard to 'diversity': how much of 'diversity' is about reducing discrimination of 'others'? Otherwise, perhaps 'diversity' is more about obtaining access to people's practices and strategies of identification rather than about working towards the enfranchisement of those who are discriminated or marginalised on the basis of one or the other aspect of their identity, bodily dispositions, or lifestyle. In other words: was diversity as a potential instrument of empowerment from below turned into a precision tool of manipulating difference 'from above'?

Rather than pursuing the above similarities and parallelisms between 'development' and 'diversity' in their own right, the latter could learn one important lesson from the rather merciless scholarly controversy surrounding Ferguson and Escobar's 'discourse' thesis: that a productive way of investigating the workings of 'development' discourses is not to assume their existence and speculate on their ubiquity and influence, but to observe and analyse how they play out in manifold concrete development encounters and interactions (Grillo 1997; Olivier de Sardan 2005). This is precisely what I will argue in favour of when proposing a critical sociolinguistics of diversity. The latter takes concrete encounters or events as sites where diversity is being articulated, experienced, and made sense of with com-

municative and discursive resources that circulate locally or more broadly, reluctantly or more powerfully. Without blindly reifying the more powerful and global resources, these characteristics can be taken to indicate their hegemonic character. The struggle of this paper is, as we will see, a Bakhtinian one in that a focus on practices and emerging structures/normativities does not preclude a topography of (relative) inequality, of 'high' and 'low'.

**Post-panopticon.** Before pursuing this, it is essential to come to grips with how discourses like 'diversity' work in broader configurations of global governmentality. The prevalent configuration is the one I choose to qualify, after Bauman (2000), as 'post-panoptical'. Post-panopticon is derived from Foucault's panopticon (1975) as a scopic technology and a centralist, static regime of power/knowledge of which the interactive deficit is indicated by the contrast between an all-seeing, authoritative viewer and a defenselessly exposed and 'blind' target as well as the basic condition for unequal transparency and accessibility. Contrarily, the post-panopticon is interactive and decentralist, even messy and opaque. The term 'post-panopticon' has been applied to, and seeks to elicit parallels between, such diverse domains as governance, knowledge systems, and media use (Kaplan 1995; Mathiesen 1997; Bauman 2000; Weibel 2002; Haggerty 2006; Maguire 2009; Mirzoeff 2011). Four characteristics stand out: transnationality, multidirectionality, heteronormativity/polycentricity, and the intertwining of visibility and mobility.

Above anything else, the post-panopticon needs to be situated in the 'new geographies of governmentality' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), which are exemplarily those of cities (Appadurai 2001: 25) and cyberspaces (Mirzoeff 2011). In contrast to the top-down, unilateral interactions of the panopticon, those of the post-panopticon are multidirectional, muddled (Valentine 2008), and transversal (Simone 2005). One of the most telling instances of such multidirectionality is what Nielsen (2011) described as 'inverse governmentality', whereby in *casu* marginalised people living on the fringes of the city in sub-

Saharan Africa themselves shape 'the governing powers which condition their everyday interactions' 'by drafting and implementing (illicit) urban plans' (Nielsen 2011: 353). These interventions closely resemble those described by Appadurai among homeless organisations in Mumbai that engage in self-enumeration and self-surveying as strategies of 'auto governmentality' or 'counter-governmentality' (Appadurai 2001: 34). Simone also marks the importance of similar 'planning from below' (Simone 2003: 231), but points out that urban publics in such interventions work towards transcending arrangements ('forms of being together or of being connected') rather than 'coming together to consensually decide the common rules of participation' (Simone 2010: 288). The heteronormativity of such counter-governmentality is perhaps best illustrated by the story of the Internet: a military panoptical technology that was appropriated, transformed and expanded into a composite global infrastructure of communication, socialisation and learning. Lastly, in media studies the post-panoptical relates to the omnipresence of digital technology and mobile communication, and looks at how deep mediatisation is changing the classic 'panoptical' relations (Koskela 2004; Andrejevic 2006). Two principal shifts can be argued to make up the post-panopticon: (a) the shift away from neatly hierarchised media transfers between senders and receivers towards the capillary dissemination and emerging ubiquity of media production and consumption (Hand and Sandywell 2002); and (b) the shift from static to hyper-mobile media use (Corner 1997).

The first shift consists in the radical democratisation of the uses of media. Whitaker's (1999) 'participatory panopticon' and Guattari's 'post-media' (1990) combine inspection 'from above' with 'self-surveillance' from below. Video and surveillance cameras (CCTV), the Internet, webcams, smart phones, etc., produce still as well as moving images, and circulate them at great speed over large distances. For Boyne (2000: 301) 'the machinery of surveillance is now always potentially in the service of the crowd as much as the executive.' This horizontality and reciprocity of the post-panopticon stands in stark contrast to

the hierarchical verticality of the panopticon as described by Foucault (1975: 256).

The hyper-mobile aspect of the post-panopticon relates to the fact that media devices become ever more compact and mobile, enabling media-users to increasingly encroach on each other's personal/private spaces (Fetveit 1999: 791). This not only applies to individual smartphones or to web communication, but also to the professional media such as television formats and genres which make abundant use of 'scopic mobility' (Corner 1997: 15). One of the eminent exponents of this development is the multifarious genre of *reality television*. Dovey (2000: 26) calls this 'first person media' because it relies on the 'constant iteration of "raw" intimate human experience.' The deep sharing that comes with the relative media mobility stands in sharp contrast to the encapsulation or compartmentalisation which (together with verticality), Foucault (1975: 256) identified as one of the two basic characteristics of the panopticon. In terms proposed recently by Mirzoeff (2011), post-panoptic visibility is the key element of the present-day 'global counterinsurgency' predicament which combines extreme forms of (often digital) visualisation (e.g. computer warfare) with new strategies of optical invisibility through chaotic, informal or under-the-radar operations and counter-surveillance from below – what Cascio (2005) calls 'sousveillance'.

The type of diversity that fits the post-panopticon sketched above is one that is steeped in contingent processes of articulation and results in fluid and unpredictable 'metro-identities'. For Stuart Hall, identification is the changing outcome of a 'relation of subject to discursive formations' conceived 'as an articulation' in the sense worked out by Laclau, whereby 'all articulations are properly relations of "no necessary correspondence" ', i.e. founded on that contingency which 'reactivates the historical' (cited in Hall 1996b: 14). In the context of intensified transnationalism in urban and cyber contexts, Maher coined the term 'metro', which he first used in combination with ethnicity (Maher 2005) – in the sense of Hall's new ethnicities – and later also with language. In tune with what I described

above as the post-panoptical, 'metro' for Maher (2010: 577) 'points to phenomena that travel below the radar of bordered perceptions of ethnicity and language; more underground (metro) than overground.' Metroethnicity and metrolinguistic styles are typically situated in the fast and fluid spaces of metropolitan urbanity and the Internet. Finally, by virtue of their inherent capriciousness and ephemeral nature, 'metro' phenomena retain an oppositional potential: they resist 'reified essentialist ethnic, religious, and cultural identities...' (Maher 2010: 577).

But, even if transient metro-identities are bound to elude the unwieldy apparatus of multiculturalism and multilingualism, they may be recuperated by the more supple and pervasive 'diversity', particularly in its consumerist dimension. The mobility and flexibility of identification in what Bauman (2000: 90) calls a 'shopping around' type of life, are not so much 'vehicles of emancipation' as 'instruments of the redistribution of freedom'. This of course is a thorny matter and it is not quite clear whether Bauman is being cynical. The way I understand it is that 'diversity' gets under people's skin in often very sophisticated ways; it gets to people in whatever way they identify or not, seek to align with or distance themselves from certain facets of identity, patterns of consumption, lifestyles, etc. In sum, 'diversity' inscribes choices as ontological facets of identity, grounds them as items of one's being that require to be accommodated, looked after, catered for, or taken care of. That opens myriad ways of consumption and commodification – a predicament Bauman (2000: 90) aptly summarises as 'divided we shop'. Here, 'diversity' appears as a post-panoptical system of control/management/subjectification and self-realisation. Such, of course, does not preclude the fact that 'diversity' or the identifications to which it gives rise are resisted or reworked in metro-identities of some kind or other.

Although all this is very speculative and approximate, it is important to see the immense possibilities 'diversity' or 'counter-diversity' offer for self-realisation by individuals and for entrepreneurs, authorities, and markets to deliver the goods and services and to assist in that multiplex

self-realisation. A critical sociolinguistics of diversity is called upon to address this.

### **Third and last step: towards a critical sociolinguistics of diversity**

The critical sociolinguistics of diversity, whose contours are explored in this section, is an attempt to answer two related questions concerning super-diversity as an emerging perspective: (a) why does sociolinguistics need super-diversity, or what can super-diversity offer present-day sociolinguistics?<sup>1</sup>; and (b) can the notion of super-diversity be situated in the debate on post-coloniality, or could super-diversity be a second important step in the decolonisation of the human sciences?

In the opening section of this paper we looked at how in the 1960s and 1970s a significant attempt was made from within the frontier zone of anthropology and linguistics to further the decolonisation of the human sciences by reconceptualising cultural production in terms of complexity and mobility. Therefore, the question now is double: if super-diversity could contribute to anthropology and sociolinguistics, would this contribution add another impulse to their decolonisation trajectory? Before dealing with the former issue of contribution, let us first look at how super-diversity could fit into the story of decolonisation. One such recent and relevant story is the one Mbembe (2010) told in connection with Africa and the way its decolonisation confronts present-day complexity and mobility.

The first massive, often violent move of decolonisation consisted in breaking down the panoptical system of differentiating and territorialising racial identities, ethnic characters and (tribal) cultural-linguistic units (Chauveau and Dozon 1987; Mamdani 1996; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). For Mbembe (2010), this older moment of decolonisation and transgression (of the 1960s) has been supplemented by a second moment of intensified migration and the formation of new diasporas in the course of the 1990s. This dispersion and circulation is resulting in a multipolar

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<sup>1</sup> This question was asked to me by Lian Madsen in August 2012.

Africa and is made up of processes of 'metissage and vernacularization' in an overall 'aesthetics of interlacement' which Mbembe calls afropolitanism (ibid.: 228-231). It does not require much of an argument to equate the second moment in the post-colonial worlding of Africa with the moment of super-diversity in Europe.

The sociolinguistic counterpart of this operation is what Makoni and Pennycook (2007) call disinventing and reconstituting languages both in the ex-metropolises and their former colonies. This operation, again, corresponds in its most basic aspects with what Blommaert and Rampton (2011) put forward as contemporary sociolinguistics' potential contribution to the study of super-diversity. In a nutshell, Makoni and Pennycook (2007) denounce multilingualism, which, in the case of (colonial) Africa, was an 'instrument of exploitation'. Programmatically they do not opt merely for disinventing and exceptionalising languages as separate and enumerable categories, but also for a radical creolistics, which posits the normality of transidiomatic practices and creoles against all claims to know, count, name and define languages. These suggestions indeed come very close to what many others have suggested in the way of heteroglossic blending, such as Jørgensen's (*et al.*) polylingual languaging, Rampton's crossing and styling, Creese and Blackledge's translanguaging, etc. (see Blommaert and Rampton 2011:7 for an overview). The counterpart to Makoni and Pennycook's exceptionalising move consists in looking for emerging structures and normativity in this pool of fluidity, creativity and communicative agency – 'something identifiable, nameable, [and] determinate' (Rampton 2013) or 'patterns offering perceptions of similarity and stability' such as registers (Blommaert 2007: 117). These affinities between the explicitly 'decolonising' sociolinguistics of Makoni and Pennycook and the main ingredients of what Blommaert (2010) calls a 'critical sociolinguistics of globalization', largely confirm what sociolinguistics can contribute to the study of super-diversity. However, these affinities also carry strong indications of the reverse type of dependency relation: why sociolinguistics needs super-diversity

as an emerging perspective. The very provisional answer to this question is a three-step trajectory in which Fabian and Bakhtin are our main guides.

A critical sociolinguistics of diversity (hereafter CSD), it seems, must set off from super-diversity's transgressive moment, which consists of discarding the false certainties of multiculturalism and its endorsement of established differences and hierarchies. This is sociolinguistics' entry into the post-panopticon of unregimented, messy, transversal interactions among actors who enjoy the relative openness of performing 'dividuality' in metrolingualism, in styling and crossing, in activating certain repertoires, in engaging in certain alignments, etc. This is nicely summarised by Fabian albeit in the idiom of theatre:

Moral and political multiculturalism are the privilege of the powerful and the protected. Courage, imagination, and practice are needed to meet otherness in its everyday theatrical forms of self-presentation with all its tricks and props, postures and poses, masks and costumes, white-face and blackface (Fabian 1999: 30).

The second step consists in CSD embracing the radical unpredictability that comes with the melt-down of the diversity measurement system which super-diversity has provoked. Directly linked to super-diversity's special focus on transnationalism, CSD engages with foreignness as never before (Riley 2007: 162) and can only overcome its lack of familiarity through painstaking interaction, which Fabian (1979) described some time ago:

As it seems now, sociolinguistics is at odds with the 'changing', processual, creative and emergent characteristics of communication because its rules only catch established features and, perhaps, some variation within established features. It has, therefore, considerable difficulties with communicative exchanges between speakers who are not members of the same community, who do not share systems of rules, at least not fully, and whose interaction is such that in all probability they will never share all the rules. This is the case of the foreigner or stranger who settles in another society and whom sociolinguists, tellingly enough, tend to view as an irritating deviant, not as a person who creatively transcends confines of socially sanctioned rules of communication (Fabian 1979: 18).

There is little doubt that contemporary sociolinguistics is fairly well equipped both theoretically and methodologically to deal with the challenges of the 'the unexpected', not in the least because the latter is increasingly thematised as such (Blommaert 2012; Pennycook 2012). Key to this unexpectedness is that actors, speakers and writers, participants in communication are endowed with enough agency to transcend the established correlations between the variables of their speech and certain predetermined social categories. The third wave of variation studies, Eckert (2012: 97-98) argues, mainly referring to Silverstein's 'indexical mutability' and Agha's 'enregisterment', has reversed the relation between language and society: speakers have become 'stylistic agents, tailoring linguistic styles in ongoing and lifelong projects of self-construction and differentiation' (see also Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2008: 540). In a similar vein, for Pennycook (2012: 124), genres, discourses and style need to be understood 'as practices that form the texts, knowledge and identity of which they speak. This position then makes it possible to see language practices as part of the formation of the social.' Taken together, CSD's espousal of unpredictability is culturally critical in that it wipes away the false certainties of how, or the lines within, people construct meaning in interaction. It is critical in the sense of counterhegemonic in that it destabilises established systems of difference or regimes of diversity. As we have seen exemplarily in Eckert's eulogy of agency, it appears as though actors build up meaning single-handedly, conjuring up the orders of indexicality of their predilection. The last step towards a CSD consists in adding social critique to cultural critique by bringing in power relations.

The third step consists in CSD engaging with super-diversity's dimension of 'counter-diversity'. The latter includes a range of phenomena which I have situated in dynamics 'from below' – countering, reworking, or simply escaping established identities, categories, standards, registers, styles, etc. Without for that matter having to resort to the concept of class as such, it is essential that any (socially) critical human science retains a

general sense of 'above' and 'below', in order to grasp processes of standardisation, enregisterment, named and enumerable languages, styles, genres, etc. In this, Bakhtin and Volosinov provide a firm basis. According to Hall (1996a: 297), 'Volosinov's account counterposed the exercise of cultural power through the imposition of the norm in an attempt to freeze and fix meaning in language to the constant eruption of new meanings, the fluidity of heteroglossia, and the way meaning's inherent instability and heterogeneity dislocated and displaced language's apparently "finished" character.' It is clear that in what White calls Bakhtin's 'critical sociolinguistics of culture' (White 2002: 129), the high and low are thought in an exemplarily monocentric world with the state, the highly coded, the prestigious, and the monoglossia, on the one hand, and the 'folk', the dispersed, the subordinated, and the heteroglossia, on the other hand (Bakhtin 1981: 271; White 2002: 116, 126, 131). For White (2002: 117), this dialogic interaction between 'high' and 'low' forms of language is critical in Bakhtin's model and 'prevents the concept of heteroglossia from degenerating into a mixed bag of sociolinguistic variables.' By taking this on board, CSD should be equipped to inscribe itself in the dynamics of counter-governmentality and counter-diversity described above.

In conclusion, it appears that super-diversity's contribution to contemporary sociolinguistics is important. It is there to remind sociolinguistics of the complex dynamics of diversity both as social and cultural practice and as (hegemonic) discourse and regulation. Moreover, super-diversity may push sociolinguists to go beyond their current limits in an attempt to shape a new moment in the post-colonial history of liberatory and democratising human and social sciences.

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# Buffalaxed superdiversity: representations of the other on YouTube

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## Abstract

In this article, we investigate how the oriental Other – increasingly a diversifying being – is represented in the context of translocal YouTube culture. More specifically, we look at videos which through subtitling and editorial commentary entextualize and resemiotize the figure of the Other to western audiences. We will take a close look at three typical ‘buffalaxed’ videos and investigate how each of these constructs images of the Other that are both divergent from the image transmitted in the source video as well as quite ambiguous and multi-layered. On the basis of our analysis, we will argue that while the videos repeat and remodify aspects of the stereotypical and discriminatory Western heteronormative metanarratives of the Orient, they also depict the Other in ways in which his/her otherness is no longer the simple anti-thesis of ‘Us’ – the western subject – but, occasionally, aligned with or even very much like ‘Us’.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media provide Internet users with a range of affordances for discourse practice, social (inter)action, and cultural production. Through these affordances, topics that interest the participants – political issues, cult phenomena, and mass-mediated popular cultural products, for example – are appropriated in various ways. If enough people with shared interests and agendas chip in, their contributions may grow into veritable memes which multiply, mutate, and spread on social media in a pandemic way. One infectious meme like this is the genre of *buffalaxed videos*<sup>1</sup>, which have recently mushroomed

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<sup>1</sup> The term *buffalax*, was originally the alias of the editor who first started producing videos of this kind. Later the term was adopted by others as the label for the whole genre.

on YouTube as an outcome of an outburst of interest in the creation and sharing of humorous and subversive representations of the oriental Other.

Typically, buffalaxed videos are parody versions of snippets of motion pictures, TV broadcasts or musical performances which are originally in a language incomprehensible to most westerners and which feature such Others as Bollywood characters or oriental pop singers. Their production involves giving the video “subtitles for what it sounds like” (*Urban Dictionary*) in the buffalax producer’s own language. More specifically, in order to create new content, s/he uses the so called mondegreen or soramimi<sup>2</sup> technique – a technique which consists of a deliberate mishearing of something said or sung – to provide the original footage with new subtitles in his/

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see e.g. the Wikipedia articles for Mondegreen and Soramimi (a Japanese originated word used explicitly for multilingual mondegreens).

her own language which are as closely homophonic as possible with words said or sung in the original footage. Thus, a new video is created, with new meanings generated not only via the subtitles but also through their co-occurrence and juxtaposition with the original image and audio.

The resemiotized Others in buffalax videos are interesting also because in their own way they highlight the ways in which social media practices are increasingly characterized by processes of superdiversification. This they do in at least three interrelated ways. Firstly, social media constitute forums for activities and interactions by individuals and groups who are themselves superdiverse, in other words, diverse across a wide range of variables (Vertovec 2007). In this sense, social media spaces can resemble superdiverse urban social spaces which Susanne Wessendorf (2011: 7), for example, has described as locations in which diversity has become 'commonplace'. These social spaces that Wessendorf studied, such as the London Borough of Hackney, are characterized not only by a multiplicity of different ethnic and migrant minorities, but also by differentiations in terms of migration histories, religions, educational backgrounds, legal statuses, length of residence, and economic backgrounds among mixed populations consisting of ethnic minorities, migrants, and host society populations with varied social and cultural backgrounds. In such spaces, complex diversity and patterns of social relations and interactions across categorical and traditional boundaries are experienced and perceived as a normal part of social life.

In many respects, the relations and interactions on social media by individuals with varied and complex identities are a good example of this kind of superdiversity. However, besides functioning as a superdiverse social space, social media illustrate superdiversification also because in them language use, communication, dissemination of information, and mediation of cultural practices and products increasingly feature mobility, plurality, heterogeneity, and poly-centricity of semiotic resources and normativities through and with which participants

express themselves and communicate with others. Within them, communication and interaction are often multimodal and linguistically and discursively heterogeneous, such heterogeneity serving participants as a means for indexing identifications which are not organized on the basis of local, ethnic, national or regional categories only, but which are increasingly translocal. In social media practices, participants are thus orienting not only to their local affiliations but also to groups and cultures which can be distant but with which they share interests, causes or projects. (Leppänen 2009, 2012.)

The third sense in which buffalaxed videos can be seen as an exemplification of superdiversification is that for translocal YouTube meme cultures they offer a discursive space and a set of semiotic resources with which they can strive to make sense of and evaluate their experiences relating to superdiversity. In the case of buffalaxed videos, the aspect of superdiversity they centre on is the oriental Other. What makes the oriental Other superdiverse, rather than simply an embodiment of traditional western racist dichotomies of 'Us' and 'Them', is that the Other, as featured in mediated popular culture, is no longer easily classifiable as a member of a familiar and recognizable social, cultural or ethnic category, but something much more challenging, complex, and nuanced.

It is this third dimension of mediated superdiversity that will be the specific focus in our article. With the help of three examples from buffalaxed videos and the audience commentary they have given rise to, we wish to show how participants in the translocal buffalax activity culture on YouTube make sense of and represent the superdiversifying oriental Other. In our analysis, we will investigate how subtitling and its combination and juxtaposition with the original footage are employed by buffalax producers to create new semiotic and interpretative potential. We will show how the Other – whose language is incomprehensible to westerners but who has become an increasingly recognizable and proximal figure to them through popular culture, media, and everyday encounters – is made to speak to western audiences in ways that may index a range of different stances.

### **YouTube: CONVERGENT AND DIVERGENT MEDIA PROSUMPTION**

The reason why YouTube has become such a popular platform for the production and consumption of media content has a great deal to do with its capacity to offer a multi-dimensional space for mediated cultural activities and products. This, on the one hand, allows interconnections and intertwining of a range of media platforms and products, and, on the other hand, offers relatively free and non-moderated opportunities for staking a niche medium for specific groups and interests. In other words, YouTube is characterized by a mixture of convergence and divergence.

While new technologies tend to give rise to occasional hypes on how they can open up entirely new opportunities for communication, empowerment, and agency, it is important to remember that they are not entirely new – similar opportunities, practices and forms of agency have existed before the new technology emerged. This is true of media convergence as well: as early as some thirty years ago, it was argued by Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983: 58) that, thanks to “the capability of digital electronics”, the historically separated modes of communication (e.g., conversation, theater, news, and text) were becoming one grand system. Likewise, with the increase and diversification of media services and technologies – newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, programs, networks, information services, video games, and video tapes – also media divergence was visible as early as in the 1970s and 1980s. Well before the 1990s, mass media had already evolved into a segmented and diverse “blip culture” consisting of short, modular blips of information – adverts, theories, shreds of news, for example (Toffler 1981: 182).

In this on-going process of de-massification, the internet and YouTube represent, nevertheless, the next step. These technologies have enabled and brought about a veritable explosion of the amount and complexity of remixing and mashupping media products and outlets. As one of the most popular online video broadcasting platforms and social media, YouTube is a case in point: it is not only a medium in which people watch videos, listen to music, broadcast their

own videos and archive their audio-visual material (see e.g. Burgess & Green 2009; Snickars & Vonderau 2009), but it also provides a forum for DIY cultures to flourish, for commercial media conglomerates to promote their products, and for niches and memes to breed, multiply, and diversify.

As an example of convergence culture (Jenkins 2008: 274), YouTube is a forum in which different media, producers, amateurs, professionals, consumers, uses, and ideologies come together and in which the boundaries and borderlines between them are blurred. It fosters active participation: as there is no clear distinction there between production and consumption, consumers can be active in the creation and circulation of new content (Jenkins 2008: 3; see also Burgess & Green 2009: 10). Many YouTube users are, in fact, ‘prosumers’ (see Toffler 1981), at the same time consuming YouTube and other media and producing their own video content using their own computers and mobile phones. With developments like these, we are clearly moving from traditional one-directional ‘read-only’ media consumption towards a ‘read-write’ culture (Hartley 2008, as cited in Burgess & Green 2009: 48). Prosumption is also one of the characteristics of buffalaxed videos: while they often originate in specific media contexts, they are transferred to and embedded within other mediated spaces. These include, firstly, the producer’s own computer with the help of which the original footage is modified with such techniques as subtitling or bricolage in ways not unlike professional film editing. Secondly, the edited product is published on YouTube, where it can be viewed, discussed, and evaluated in ways that may resemble watching and discussing videos with your friends. Thus, convergence is at the heart of the entire buffalaxed enterprise.

However, as was suggested above, YouTube is also a divergent media environment. On it, individuals and groups representing different traditions and backgrounds can find their own communicative and socio-cultural niches. These can range from closely knit virtual communities of practice – which may be defined by such common denominators as shared origins, culture, lan-

guage, or ethnicity – to virtual meeting places of people loosely connected through some shared interest or issue. The divergence of YouTube is also apparent in how its content is remediated (Bolter & Grusin 2002; Grusin 2009) in other media forms and outlets. The same content can be dealt with in a range of genres – in video blogs (vlogs), instructional videos, presentations, shreds, uploaded and digitized snippets from TV and film, and spoofs (mocking imitations), just to mention a few. The divergence of buffalaxed videos shows particularly in the fact that they represent the favored genre for a segment of the YouTube audience that is interested in its particular ways of crafting, sharing, and appreciating ‘exotic’ footage. This is also one of the reasons why buffalax producers are willing to be involved in this type of voluntary and non-salaried late modern cottage industry and its rather laborious and time-consuming processes of remediation and editing: they have an enthusiastic audience who value their products and the opportunities they create for commentary, discussion, and interaction and, who, through their appreciation of the cultural products also accord social and cultural capital to the successful buffalax editors.

### **YouTube HUMOUR AND (LIQUID) RACISM**

The prevalent YouTube culture tends to be playful and affective entertainment rather than, say, an example of critical-rational debate and deliberation in the sense of the Habermasian public sphere (Burgess & Green 2009: 103). Often, the humor they provide is quite conservative and geared towards supporting and preserving the dominant social order, traditional authority, and gender and racial hierarchies, while discouraging and denigrating diversity and difference (Jenkins 2008: 292-293). Again, the humor in buffalaxed videos partly fits in this picture. It often focuses on social and cultural groups and cultures which are seen as being in some way distinct from the hegemonic groups and cultures. In representing these groups, the videos can recycle conventions of nationalistic or ethnic humor which, to use Christie Davies’s (1996: 4) words, are invariably aimed at the “pinning of some undesirable quality on a particular ethnic group in a comic way

or to a ludicrous extent”. While doing so, Davies (1996: 312) argues, ethnic humor contributes “to a people’s sense of their own identity and character”, thereby reinforcing the sense of “vicarious superiority” of the person voicing the humor.

As a cultural practice the representation of the Other can have material, social, cultural, and personal consequences for those who end up as in- and out-groups (see e.g. Raisborough & Adams 2008: 3). The consequences of disparaging humor can create and enforce hierarchies of value and have an impact on those who have access to resources with which distinctions and categories are created. In addition, voice – possibilities and resources for communicative and social agency – can be unevenly distributed among participants (Jenkins 2009; Burgess & Green 2009: 81-82). While in technologically advanced and affluent countries even young children can be quite knowledgeable and capable of sophisticated forms of participation in mediated contexts such as YouTube, in other contexts, due to a lack of technological resources or know-how, not everyone has the opportunity to fully take part in buffalaxed activities. In more concrete terms, this may have the result that those identifying with the buffalaxed oriental Others do not have the capacity to buffalax back.

From this perspective, buffalaxed videos could well be seen as an example of “disparagement humor” which “denigrates, belittles, or maligns a social group” (Ford & Ferguson 2004: 79), and which serves as a weapon of marking boundaries and building hierarchies of value (Billig 2005; Raisborough & Adams 2008). In the same way as for example Beverley Skeggs (2005: 969) has argued in regard to the representation of class on TV, the representations of the Other in buffalaxed videos are also typically made “through cultural values premised on morality” – where the lack of hegemonic moral value is a crucial attribute often assigned to the Other. Further, as YouTube and, in particular, the buffalaxed genre, are taken by many as providing simple fun, the platform makes it possible to mount cultural representations in ways which are not politically correct – the pretext being that after all, it is all just ‘harmless’ entertainment, and nothing serious.

A similar point has also been made by Angela McRobbie (2005: 104) who has argued that in the current “post-politically correct times”, mocking discourse has become accepted by both media industries – TV comedy, for example – and their audiences in “the space of relaxation and enjoyment provided by the media and entertainment”.

However, explicitly denigrating and disparaging humor is not the only material buffalaxed videos draw on and recycle: in fact, they seldom simply repeat the traditional dichotomous and stereotypical conceptions of what are taken to be the inclusive and exclusive groups and cultures. Rather, as is perhaps typical of what has been referred to in more general terms as “multicultural humor” (Rainbird 2004), they foreground multiple possibilities for interpretation, and include an implausible element without which they would otherwise be considered serious or simply nonsensical. At its best, YouTube can even function as a site for cosmopolitan cultural citizenship (Burgess & Green 2009: 79). As a great deal of YouTube content originates in people’s everyday lives, it creates affordances for people to represent their identities and perspectives, engage with self-representations by others, and reflect on cultural difference (Burgess & Green 2009: 81). Within the buffalaxed activity culture, traces of such orientations are occasionally present as well. For example, the discussions the videos give rise to sometimes reveal that the original footage is seen as an instance of globally shared culture, rather than being an example of narrowly defined nationalistic or ethnic culture.

Because of their ambiguity, buffalaxed videos could also be considered as examples of what Simon Weaver (2010) has called “liquid racism”. Along the lines of the term “liquid modern” (Bauman 2005), the notion of liquid racism refers to situations and societies in which the conditions directing and shaping people’s actions change so rapidly that their ways of acting do not get to evolve into habits or routines before the conditions change again (Weaver 2010: 678). What is typical of liquid racism is that it uses recognizable embodied and culturally racist signs, but at the same time includes various layers of meaning, which make multiple interpretations possible

(Weaver 2010: 679). For example, in liquid racism the forms of racism purported may be so subtle and deeply nested in familiar and ‘natural(ized)’ meta-narratives about diversity, that they can be interpreted as only humor – as not racist at all. And if according to these familiar meta-narratives something is regarded as being humorous only, the responsibility of interpretation shifts to the recipient, which easily leads to judging the recipients as having no sense of humor if they find the humor somehow problematic (Howit & Owusu-Bempah 2009: 48).

### BUFFALAXED VIDEOS IN FOCUS

In this article, we will investigate three buffalaxed videos as typical representatives of their genre. The first one of them is *Crazy Indian Video... Buffalaxed!* (a.k.a. *Benny Lava*) – the American video after which the genre of ‘buffalaxed videos’ was quickly dubbed, and which became a viral meme imitated and copied in many of the later videos. In addition, to show how buffalaxed videos quickly emerged as a translocal activity culture, we will subsequently look at two Finnish videos, *Nilin hanhet* (‘The Geese of the Nile’) and *Terojen Koettelemus* (‘The Trial of the Two Teros’).

Although the Finnish videos are produced by editors based in Finland and in Finnish, in many respects they resemble the trendsetting *Benny Lava*: as will become clear below, their overall goal as well as the ways in which they modify their original footage are very similar to *Benny Lava*. At the same time, all three videos also highlight the variation and diversity of the buffalaxed genre and its reception. In this sense, they are examples of the perennial translocality of YouTube. While they align with the globally convergent prosumption culture, they also have their proximal audiences and dimensions of meaning that are more apparent locally. For example, *Benny Lava* – partly because its subtitles are in English – is truly a global product. At the same time, as we will show below, it is clear that its primary intended audience is North-American, whose social, cultural, and mediated reality has for a long time been saturated by superdiversity.

The two Finnish cases, in turn, illustrate the ways in which the buffalaxed format has been

domesticated for Finnish audiences. That they are subtitled in Finnish is the clearest indication of this, but, as will again become clear in our analysis below, they also align with the Finnish context in more subtle ways. Most significantly, they show how, in a time when Finland is slowly transforming from a relatively homogeneous society into a more diversified one, social media offer Finns new means with which they can make sense, discuss and tackle the diversity they increasingly encounter both in different societal contexts and via mediated channels. The two videos could, in fact, be argued to be quite different responses to the fact that diversity is knocking at the doors of Finnish society and culture. One of them ridicules a real-life Kurdish singer, a man resembling the Kurdish refugees and migrants Finns can nowadays occasionally encounter in their daily lives, and the other video parodies mediated Others, Hindi characters in a popular Bollywood film. In the discursive niche provided by the buffalaxed video phenomenon, the Finnish videos thus engage in semiotic reworking of both real-life, and mediated, cultural diversification in ways which partly draw on elements of established stereotypes, but which also go beyond these.

Our analysis of these videos draws eclectically on insights provided by sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, discourse studies, film studies, and the study of fan culture (Leppänen 2009, 2012). We approach the videos as semiotic phenomena within the social, cultural, political, and historical context of which they are part (Blommaert 2010: 3) undergoing, through buffalaxing, transidiomatic mobilization (Jacquemet 2005) and entextualization (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Silverstein & Urban 1996: 74), whereby they are decontextualized from their original cultural and media context (Indian film and Middle Eastern music videos) and recontextualized within another context. This process crucially involves resemiotization (Iedema 2003: 40; Leppänen et al., forthcoming) in the form of mondegreen subtitling and editorial commentary whereby the original material is re-interpreted and re-mediated via another media context to new audiences.

We will, in particular, pay attention to the fea-

tures and meanings of the homophonic subtitles, and the ways in which they are combined and juxtaposed with the original visual and audio footage, and show how the new video text emerging from this discursive and linguistic mashupping is a heterogeneous construct (Leppänen 2012), an ambivalent parody, indexing through the mobilization of varied semiotic resources different ideological stances towards the Other. In addition, to gain insight into how the actual audiences position themselves in relation to the buffalaxed videos and the ways in which the Other is represented in them, we will also investigate audience comments on each video.

### THE SUPERDIVERSE ORIENTAL OTHER IN BUFFALAXED VIDEOS

#### *Benny Lava*: Setting the scene for buffalaxing the Other

*Benny Lava* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYwS9k1ZexY>) is a resemiotization of a song and dance number from a South Indian Tamil motion picture *Pennin Manadhai Thottu* (2000). The film depicts a romance between a famous heart surgeon Sunil (Prabhu Deva) and Sunitha (Jeya Seel) who seeks his help for a child with a heart problem. Eventually it turns out that the two had been in love in college but that the man had deserted her at a crucial time. This misunderstanding is finally overcome and the two protagonists are united again.



An advertisement for *Pennin Manadhai Thottu*

Indian film has fans outside India as well: audiences around the world have become familiar with and keen on the conventions of Indian

romantic dramas. At the same time, their difference from the western, particularly mainstream Hollywood romantic drama is something that puzzles many western viewers. The ways in which aspects of romantic relationships are dealt with in song and dance are remarkably different from, for example, the conventions of mainstream Hollywood romantic drama. Likewise, their highly indirect and implicit means of hinting at love, erotic tension and desire may appear as quite alienating to western viewers who are used to more explicit presentations. One of the effects of the western viewers' increasing familiarity with Indian romantic film has also been that it has brought Indian characters, closer to western viewers and highlighted through fictional cinematic representation their complexity and ambiguity as representatives of the Other.

The original video depicts a song and dance scene with a large group of young women and men on a green mountain slope. The song and dance number represents the flirtation and wooing going on between the two main characters. The lyrics of the Tamil song *Kalluri Vaanil* in the original film, their English translation, and the buffalaxed subtitles can be accessed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyp7D2Nzib0>.



The leading couple with their entourage

The original lyrics are almost entirely in Tamil, with the exception of occasional English expressions (“Eyebrowwai male thookki”, “Urgent aa / operation”, “I love you endraayae...”), some of which refer to the characters' lives and the settings (e.g. “college”, “stethoscope”). The buffa-

laxed video picks up some of these contextual elements – for instance, it also depicts the characters as students falling in love. The lyrics also describe the characters' romantic and erotic feelings, but do so with quite indirect means: there are, for example, poetic comparisons (“As Haiku, poetically she said I love you”) and metaphor (“dolphins”, “springs”, “floods”). A similarly covert description of the romantic relationship is conveyed through the dancing. There is no physical contact between the romantic couple; instead, there are suggestive looks, symbolic gestures, and a great deal of whirling and circling around each other.

In contrast to the original, the buffalaxed lyrics are very explicit in their sexual references (e.g. “I told a high school girl...I love you inside me”), allude to sodomy (“Who put the goat in there?”) and to the sexual fetish of peeing (“i like to swim in his beeeeejaaaaayyy!”). These kinds of transformations of the metaphoric, indirect, and poetic expressions of feelings in the highly moderated Indian romantic films into almost pornographic declarations of sexual desire are, in fact, a recurrent discursive strategy in buffalaxed videos. As explicit breaches of the taboos underlying the cinematic narration of the original story they also constitute one of the sources of humor in them.

The subtitles are not, however, the only means for creating humor in buffalaxed videos; another means is the way in which they are combined and contrasted with the image, music, singing, and dancing in the videos. This is also evinced by audience comments – many of them repeat some of the particularly transgressive lines, with iconic indications that they find them extremely funny. As an illustration, consider the following:<sup>3</sup>

- HA HA! my fav line is “Now poop on them Oliver!!!!” LOL!
- hahahahahahahaha i love to see you pee on us tonight wTF:P
- Haha “I’ll lay a friend of yours.” :)

<sup>3</sup> All the audience comments have been collected between January and May 2011 from the YouTube site in which the video was published. To protect the identity of the commentators, their aliases are not given here.

In addition, buffalaxed videos contain many references to western phenomena, names, places, and cultural products. For example, the lyrics of *Benny Lava* include several English names (“Ed”, “Benny”, “Oliver”, “Donna”), expressions (“punk”, “Fucking A”), and an American place name (“Seattle”). Such insertions function to recontextualize the video and the story depicted in it as if it were simultaneously taking place in an Indian location with Indian characters, as well as within an American context. Along with the sexually explicit language, these recurrent multiple localizations of the video content contribute to the fact that the exotic and foreign story begins to appear as comically understandable to a western audience.

This too is very apparent in audience comments: on the one hand, they voice half-serious bafflement (“Who is Benny Lava? After listening to the song around 50 times, I’m still a bit unsure”), and, on the other, foreground how the juxtaposition of the oriental and the western is seen as a comic one. For example, viewers have made comments in which Prabhu Deva’s looks and dance style are compared to American artists (e.g. “indian george michael lol”, “He thinks he is crossed between George Michael and Michael Jackson...”). That such comparisons are, however, not simply humorous becomes apparent when one remembers that both of these singer-dancers have been depicted in the media as sexual Others. The foreignness and strangeness of the male protagonist here is thus accentuated by implying that this ethnic Other identifies with a sexual Other of the same ethnicity – a recurrent feature, as we will see with our two other examples, of many buffalaxed videos.



The male protagonist Sunil (Prabhu Deva)

Another typical feature in buffalaxed videos is the incoherence and absurdity of the new stories emerging in them. As the driving force behind the new subtitles is to transcribe the otherwise incomprehensible original lyrics according to what they could sound like in the video editor’s own language, the outcome is necessarily fragmented. In addition to the large number of ‘transgressive’ references to drugs, sex, homosexuality, and bodily functions, as well as double-entendres (e.g., “You need a bun to bite Benny Lava!”) in the lyrics, another key characteristic is indeed that they do not add up to a coherent whole as a text. This is because they basically consist of a list of nonsensical one-liners which are completely detached from the video content and from each other. Each new line rarely, if ever, refers to or links up with the previous ones. Consider, for instance, the following:

“Have you been high today?  
I see the nuns are gay!  
My brother yelled to me...  
I love you inside Ed

My looney bun is fine, Benny Lava!  
Minor bun engine made Benny Lava!”

A very typical audience comment is, in fact, a reaffirmation that this kind of nonsensicality and incoherence is highly comic – an example being: “It veri funny.... It really sound like english.... Thnx to this, alot ppl will smile n laugh ...”

On the whole, then, the buffalaxed video transforms the oriental Others into culturally incongruous figures: it transfigures their image and identity and shows incomprehension of their values and communication code. The Others in the video still remain characters from a recognizable Indian romantic film, but they also acquire new attributes that disrupt the uniformity of their moral and cultural identity. That said, it could nevertheless be argued that, while these ways of representing the Other can clearly be considered as disparaging and denigrating, they are not necessarily entirely negative. As also witnessed by the massive audience commentary on *Benny Lava*, for the fans of Indian film the buffalax industry – in exactly the same way as fan fic-

tion and fan art in general – is also an expression of their attachment and appreciation of the cultural object (see also Leppänen 2009, 2012). The entextualization and resemiotization practices so typical of fan cultures, in this respect, are a sign of active prosumption – of searching for new ways of re-crafting the cultural product which are not always derogatory and problematic, but which also accentuate and add to its appreciation. This is nicely encapsulated by one of the commentators of Benny Lava when s/he wrote that “The funny thing about these faux translations is I end up fucking loving the songs!”

### ***Niilin hanhet*, ‘The Geese of the Nile’: The ambivalent Other**

Our second example, *Niilin hanhet*, ‘The Geese of the Nile’ ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo\\_edXUIrT8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo_edXUIrT8)), is a buffalaxed video produced by a Finnish young man. The original music video used as the basis for ‘The Geese of the Nile’ was published on YouTube in October 2008, and it was soon followed by its buffalaxed version. Until the buffalaxed version became a YouTube hit in Finland, and the band performing in it was located by the Finnish media, the band members were completely unaware of their sudden YouTube fame. In an interview in a Finnish newspaper, the singer, Ebdo Mihemed, let out that both videos had been tremendous surprises to the band (*Helsingin Sanomat* 2009).

Mihemed and his band come from Syria: while they are not national celebrities, they are popular performers in weddings in their home region around Aleppo. The original song performed by the band is called *Pênzedî Zêde* and it represents a typical folk song type of the Anatolia region and its neighboring areas (Aaltonen & Kärjä 2010: 6). It is a traditional Kurdish wedding song in which a young girl asks her mother for the permission to marry the man she loves, instead of marrying a man who has been arranged for her. The video is basically a straightforward recording of a live performance of this song in a restaurant.



Ebdo Mihemed and the new lyrics

As with the previous example, the original lyrics and their translation into English, as well as the buffalaxed Finnish lyrics and their translation into English can be found at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo\\_edXUIrT8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo_edXUIrT8).

In Finland, the buffalaxed video has been a real hit: in a country with some 5.4 million inhabitants, it has been viewed more than 2.6 million times (August 2012). The new lyrics show somewhat more coherence than those in *Benny Lava*, but, again, there is no real narrative. For example, the new lyrics have no connection whatsoever to the content of the original song, the reason being they were subtitled without any knowledge of what the original song is about. Again, the buffalaxing was done on the basis of what the lyrics sound like in the video editor’s own language – in this case, Finnish. For instance, the lyrics label the singer/protagonist as “Pensseli-setä” (‘uncle push broom’; originally *pênzedî zêde*). This name suits the purposes of the buffalaxed lyrics perfectly, because it also functions as a reference to the singer’s moustache, a feature which for many Finns appears to be a highly characteristic feature of Middle Eastern men. Another descriptive attribute given to the singer in the lyrics is “meisseli-setä”, ‘uncle jackhammer’, a slightly different transcription of the original words, and it likens the man metonymically to his penis (in vernacular Finnish the word “meisseli”, literally a screwdriver, can function as a euphemism for the penis).

The sexual theme of this characterization is further accentuated in the song with the help of descriptions of the protagonist’s sexual activities: the subtitles claim that he is saying such things as ‘stick[ing] it’ ‘in my own ass’, ‘stick[ing] the

geese of the Nile' 'in my own ass', and (as perhaps another sexual act) sticking 'a banana into the mouth'. Homosexuality and sodomy are thus, once more, suggested in the representation of the oriental Other. Further, he is also depicted as dangerous ("hazardi", a 'hazard') and as being engaged in other shady and absurd activities. For example, he is subtitled as describing himself as someone who 'bites', who 'drinks whisky', and is interested in expensive cars ('Mer-Mercedez Benz') and money ('million'). Clearly, all of these descriptions are geared towards denigrating the Middle Eastern man by recycling some of the racist, Islamophobic and homophobic prejudices voiced in Finland. He is thus represented as an uncivilized and immoral beast.

What is noteworthy in this connection is that so far Finland has had relatively few immigrants and refugees. One indication of this is that the number of people with a foreign background ranges between 120,000 and 200,000 (Statistics Finland 2012) – which, at the most, is only about 3.7 per cent of the whole of the population. However, immigrants with a Middle Eastern background are beginning to be visible in Finnish society, particularly because there are many kebab and pizza restaurants that are run by them. That some Finns already have strong and prejudiced opinions about Middle Eastern people (often referred to as "ähläms"<sup>4</sup> – a well-known derogatory term in Finland) is illustrated by comments such as the following:

- Mercedes million... This is true. Namely a Mercedes is the ähläm's dream car. xD There they have these the geese of the Nile and other things such as bananas and kebab... But this is good this Geese of the Nile, xD for Real!<sup>5</sup>
- I'd fancy some kebab

At the same time, as is witnessed for example by the recent success of the populist *Perussuomalaiset* party (who call themselves *The Finns* in English) – which markets itself as a party critical of

<sup>4</sup> A mock word derived from the Arabic greeting "Ahlan wa Sahlan", 'welcome'.

<sup>5</sup> All the originally Finnish comments have been translated into English by the authors and are here given in their translated form only.

immigration – the political climate in the country has become distinctly more xenophobic. Aggression towards immigrants has increased and the coverage regarding immigrants even in the public media is often quite negative. Some of this negativity is certainly evident in the buffalaxed video and also in its reception by Finnish viewers (see also Aaltonen & Kärjä's 2010 discussion of the polarized reception of 'The Geese of the Nile').

However, as quite a few of the audience comments illustrate, the reception of the video was not exclusively mocking and racist. Comments like the following were also quite typical:

- This is a good guy. Don't you fucking call him bad or a clown. Mihemed rule!s
- I must say that Mihemed handled the job in quite a bueno way:)

In fact, the video became hugely popular in Finland. As a result, Mihemed gained instant celebrity status. He was subsequently invited to Finland not once, but twice, to tour around the country, and even gave several performances on national television. The Finnish media also became very interested in Mihemed, and in 2009 and 2010 published several articles about him. Since he did not speak Finnish or English, the articles rarely cited him verbatim or gave him much opportunity to voice his own opinions. In this sense, he was basically treated as an object with little active agency himself. Nevertheless, many of the newspaper articles written about him represented him in very positive terms, as a friendly, warm and hard-working character who really did not mind the derogatory humor in the buffalaxed lyrics of his song. For instance, one of the Finnish newspapers described his views as follows:

The likeable and easily approachable, 43-year-old singer is aware of the connotations of the songs he sings. These don't worry him. In an elegant way, he turns the situation to his advantage. "Every language has words that gain new meanings in other languages. It only produces accidental humor which people find funny." (*Ilkka*, February 14, 2010, transl. by SL)

Publicly, at least, Mihemed considered the problematic humor of the buffalaxed video accidental,

thus sidestepping the issue whether the origin of his popularity was really quite deliberately racist and xenophobic, and whether his ascension was not only spurred by the recognition of his qualities, but also by his depiction as an indecent and peculiar object. At the same time, the fact that as a Middle Eastern man he unexpectedly became a celebrity created a real opportunity for him as an artist. In another interview in a Finnish magazine *Seiska* (November 12, 2009), he commented on this by saying that “in our country, there is no freedom of the press. I didn’t know anything about YouTube, because in our country we are not allowed to use it. The possibilities for circulating music are very limited.” His celebrity status thus gave him an opportunity to make Finns see him as a real person and allowed him to introduce traditional Kurdish music to Finns, talk about the lack of freedom of speech in Syria, and record his first-ever album – which was something that he had not been able to do previously during his 20-year career as a professional wedding singer.



Ebdó Mihemed and an advertisement for his album *The Best of Pensselisetä* ('Uncle Push Broom')

Hence, the buffalaxed video which represented the oriental Other as a morally dubious figure, a homosexual and a sodomite, also made the real-life performer, singer Mihemed, a well-loved and celebrated figure in Finland, at least for some time. In a way, this kind of ambivalence in the

representation of the Other can be argued to effectively foreground the issue of what may be happening to the Other in superdiversifying social and cultural settings: in them, the traditional classificatory ideological apparatus which segments the complexity of the social world into mutually exclusive compartments of the Self and the Other is beginning to look distinctly outdated, giving impetus to new conceptualization which are more liquid in nature – and, in their liquidity, equally problematic in new ways.

### *Terojen koettelemus*, 'The Trial of the Two Teros': Othering Them and Us

The relevance of the traditional classificatory system is also brought into sharp focus in our third example. This popular Finnish buffalaxed video (1.6 million viewings) *Terojen koettelemus*, 'The Trial of the Two Teros' (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RradOrYKF8U>), depicts a scene from a popular 1975 Bollywood action adventure film *Sholay* ('Fire'), by Ramesh Sippy. *Sholay* tells the story of two convicts who are hired to capture a ruthless bandit. The film is generally considered one of the greatest classic films in the history of Bollywood, which is why it is well-known outside India as well. In this scene, the two main characters are driving an old sidecar motorbike in the countryside, vigorously singing a song called *Yeh Dosti* ('This Friendship'), a literal celebration of their friendship. Their trip is interrupted by the sight of a pretty young woman on the side of the road, and they decide to toss a coin to decide which one gets to woo her. The original lyrics and their translation into English, as well as the buffalaxed Finnish lyrics and their translation into English can again be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UvMUArtaEA>.



The new punchline: *Tero Saatana, s'olet gay* ('Damn, Tero, you're gay')

In the buffalaxed version, the original story about the two men's everlasting friendship is transformed into an exalted depiction of homoerotic love. This love story is built with the help not only of new subtitles, but also through the combination of the subtitles with the joyful, happy, and uplifting melodies of the song and the cinematic narrative which, even in the original, could be interpreted as suggesting a homoerotic subtext. The buffalax editor thus manages to suggest to viewers the interpretative possibility that this video really is a homoerotic love story. Again, in the same way as in the two other examples discussed here, the representation of these two men may indicate that in cultural representations of the Other – especially the male Other – there may, in fact, be a tendency to view ethnic otherness as also sexual otherness.

More specifically, the lyrics drive home this interpretation by their sexually explicit lexical choices. For example, the two men are depicted as having 'fucked' and being 'gay'. In addition, the refrain, "Tero saatana, s'olet gay" ('Damn, Tero, you're gay'), amplified by jocular and emphatic swearing, energetic singing and expansive body language, reinforces the impression that these two men are indeed celebrating their homosexuality here.



'I'm gay, this is OK'

Part of the humor of the video also derives from the way in which it recontextualizes and resemiotizes aspects of western-style biker films as part of a coming out story. Here, these include the motorbike and a sense of liberation from the norms of the society. Within this frame, the two men keep looking and smiling at each other

fondly, holding hands and opening themselves up to the world. They appear to be proud of what they are, and, in the same way as in the original – a celebration of male bonding – now seem to be celebrating their mutual erotic love. At the same time, it also seems clear that their homosexuality is here viewed from a western heteronormative perspective: in their unrestrained confessional delivered in an ancient sidecar motorbike, the characters do appear rather silly. For one thing, they bear no resemblance to western homoerotic cult biker icons (such as Tom of Finland characters). Perhaps because of this incompatibility with homoerotic imagery, the video has given rise to comments which also question the sexual orientation of the characters: 'this isn't a gay film, they just sound like they are gay'.

Another scene of the buffalaxed video which also subverts the heterosexuality of the two men apparent in the original film features a brief encounter with a young woman. The original scene has no dialogue or lyrics, but the buffalaxed video has added subtitles which assign new meanings to the encounter (e.g. 'the sexual orientation of the two Teros is put to the test / This woman will turn even a queer into a straight guy'). Like the practice we know from silent films, the subtitles thus function as narrative commentary steering the interpretation of what we are seeing in the scene in a particular direction.



'This woman will turn even a queer into a straight guy'

This episode is followed by dialogue, again introduced by the buffalax editor: 'Let's toss a coin: tails I get laid, heads you'. In this scene the men turn their attention to the woman and no longer to each other. The woman gives the men a leering look, and they toss the coin to decide which

of them gets to approach her. The interpretation of the original and the subtitled lyrics is the same: to get the girl.

However, whereas the original film depicts this scene entirely without dialogue, the buffalax lyrics, in the same way as our two other examples, again employ sexually explicit language (e.g. 'tails I get laid, heads you'). The coin tossed lands sideways. The men turn their heads to the woman as the decision is now handed over to her. She disappears into the wilderness, becoming unattainable. When the male characters look disappointed at what happened, the subtitled narrative plays with idioms that tie the interpretation back to the topic of being gay. The subtitled narrative states that 'banging ladies is for straight guys anyway' ("akkojen köyriminen onkin heterojen hommaa"), reversing the discriminatory Finnish idiom that if something is stupid it is 'a job for gay guys' ("homojen hommaa"). The episode is thus narrated as a temporary and futile aberration from heterosexuality, and is quickly backgrounded by the continuation of the two men's jubilant journey.

The theme of homosexuality is also approached in the video from the perspective of Nordic men. One of the instances where this becomes evident is the fact that one of the characters is named "Tero", using a very common Finnish male name. In this way, it could be argued, some of the otherness of the Oriental man is projected onto the Finnish man as well. In other words, while the two characters are represented as the unequivocal Other, for example by subtitling them as speaking in ways in which immigrants and foreigners are often taken to speak Finnish,<sup>6</sup> they are also represented as the Finnish Self, blurring the distinction between the Self and the Other. Hence, also the Finnish (man) can be the Other – as far as his sexuality is concerned. This interpretative possibility was noticed by the viewers as well, some of them implying that also their lifeworlds include a number of 'Teros' (e.g. 'One of my friends is called Tero...').

<sup>6</sup> Examples of this include doubling the length of consonants: e.g. [sa:tana] becomes [sa:t:ana] and the [ä] sound becomes an approximation between [a] and [ä], e.g. [tämä] becomes [täm:ä]).

Another example of the sexual othering of the local man was the way in which several viewers compared the two Indian characters to Swedes. Thus, for example, the highest rated comment the video got on YouTube described it as the 'national folklore of Sweden'. Another viewer pointed out that 'these are the Aryan cousins of Swedes from the bend of the Indus'. While such comments as these link the video with the notorious tradition of Finnish ethnic humor which takes all Swedish men to be homosexuals, once again, they also resemiotize the difference of the Oriental man so that it is made to characterize Otherness on another scale, in reference to the closest neighboring Other of Finns, the Swedish man.

In sum, in the same way as in the case of our two previous examples, the humor of this video arises from its subversion of the original story contents and its characters. Even those who have not seen *Sholay* can safely assume that it does *not* deal with homoerotic love, and humor is evoked when we realize that a celebration of homoerotic love would indeed be extremely out of place or abnormal in a Bollywood film (see e.g. Morreall 2009: 68). As we already saw in connection with *Benny Lava* and *Pensselisetä*, the explicit (homo)sexualization of the Oriental Others makes the men depicted in the videos quite incongruous.

However, perhaps due to the uplifting and exalted tone set by the music and the activities on the screen, the representation of the Oriental Other in the video is, once again, not altogether problematic. In fact, many viewers have interpreted the video as a coming out story and have used their YouTube comments to celebrate the characters' ride to freedom: for example, there are comments like 'I wanna be gay too if they have so much fun:)' and 'this joy of coming out doesn't cease to delight me'. In addition, some of the most prejudiced and hateful comments by viewers have been flagged as inappropriate by other viewers. YouTube viewers have thus wanted to background the overt racism and homophobia present in the reception of buffalaxed videos such as 'The Trial of the Two Teros', in support of the story about coming out and liberation.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have suggested that YouTube, as a particular example of convergent and divergent social media culture, is engaged with superdiversity in three ways. We argued that it is (1) a forum for activities and interactions by individuals and groups who may themselves be superdiverse, (2) a site where language use, communication, dissemination of information and mediation of cultural practices are marked by plurality, heterogeneity, and poly-centricity of semiotic resources and normativities, and (3) a discursive location where the superdiversifying Other can be represented and investigated.

The last of these was the focus of our analysis: we have showed here how buffalaxed videos, as an example of a particular translocal YouTube activity culture, take issue with the superdiverse Other with the help of parodic and humorous transformations, produced, most often, by western video producers, of oriental film and video footage. The reason why the Other has become a recurrent topic for this kind of semiotic work, we have argued, has to do with the fact that s/he is someone who can no longer be readily categorized with traditional classificatory schemes. The Other, an increasingly visible and proximal figure in real-life, mediated and online contexts, is characterized by diversity across a range of variables. And this complex and shifting diversity calls for new semiotic, re-interpretative work.

Further, we have suggested that for many people, and in fact for entire activity cultures, YouTube offers affordances for semiotic work focusing on the Other. In the case of buffalaxed videos, these affordances have a great deal to do with their entertainment function. In this sense, and along the lines suggested by McRobbie (2005), our analysis confirms that also buffalaxed videos can well be seen as one particular example of the post-politically correct entertainment sites in which it has become acceptable to mock and denigrate, in the name of humor.

With the help of three cases we showed that the representation of the Other in YouTube tends to be heterogeneous and ambiguous. In making multiple interpretations possible, they could be taken to illustrate what Weaver (2010) has

referred to as liquid racism. On the one hand, we traced ideological stances which recontextualized and resemiotized well established derogatory, disparaging, denigrating, and discriminatory discourses about the Other. The Other was depicted as a multifaceted negative being: as a nonsensical, naïve, immoral, over-sexualized, homosexual, and perverse figure. We also showed that s/he was represented as a fundamentally incongruous creature in the sense that the new lyrics gave him/her a voice that was systematically in conflict not only with the language, messages of the original footage and the culture it springs from, but also with the conventions, values and norms shaping the depiction of the characters and the stories that they were part of in their original contexts. For example, in all of the three videos implicit, indirect, and symbolic descriptions of the characteristics of the Other, his/her culture, and, in particular, his/her emotional, romantic, and erotic attachments were consistently converted into pornographic descriptions of his/her sexuality and sexual actions. Further, the contents of his/her messages were presented as absurd ramblings not adding up to a coherent story. Such incongruity was also seen as being responsible for much of the humor and parody of the buffalaxed videos.

Another interesting issue rising from our analysis was that in the buffalaxed videos that were examined the Other was primarily seen as male. There might be a number of explanations of why this should be the case, and the phenomenon deserves further study, but for our purposes here, it is particularly interesting to note that the male Other was depicted not only as an ethnically and culturally different creature, but also as the sexual Other – as a hyper-sexualized heterosexual man, a homosexual and a sodomite, often embodied in one and the same figure, making his otherness multiply over-determined. We concluded that in cultural representations of the male Other there may even be a tendency to conflate and fuse together ethnic Otherness with sexual Otherness.

Such over-determined Othering may, in fact, reflect extremely deep-rooted, primal anxieties surrounding the ways in which Otherness can be

encountered and dealt with emotionally and psychologically, but, again, for our purposes here, it is more relevant to note that such complicated patterns of Othering may also mirror the enormous difficulties involved in any human attempts at genuine interaction with and understanding of other humans who are for some reason conceptualized as different. In some way, in the encounter with the Other, we may be wired, as Kristeva (1991: 191-192) has argued, to deny our own difference, the stranger within us<sup>7</sup>. In the light of this conceptualization, what we fear in the Other is the uncanny way in which his or her strangeness reminds us of our own Otherness.

However, our conclusions are not entirely pessimistic. While traditional western metanarratives of the Other were made use of and recontextualized and resemiotized in our materials, we often also detected polyvalence and ambiguity both in the ways of representation and reception of the Other.

Firstly, in some instances, it was not entirely clear who the Other was. Interestingly, the (sexual) Otherness of the oriental man in our third example was also projected onto the local man, the Finns and the Swedes. While in some viewers' comments this was suggested in a derogatory way, in others it remained ambiguous, and in still others it was considered a positive thing: sexual Otherness can be a feature of the Self, and it is not necessarily a sign of immorality or corruption. Secondly, as our analyses showed, the videos also give rise to multiple interpretations and debates. Thirdly, we noted how the at times quite disparaging depictions of the Other could, nevertheless, lead to a deeper appreciation of the original source product, to opportunities for the Other to speak in his own voice, and, as in our second example, even to acquire celebrity status, which was, admittedly, partly based on the problematic, ridiculed representation in the buffalaxed video, but partly on the audiences' appreciation of the singer and his music.

<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, Cameron and Kulick (2003:122) have argued that homophobic talk can be both a performative enactment of the speakers' own heterosexuality, and an indication of the fear of the possibility of their own homosexual desire.

In sum, we hope to have shown how buffalaxed videos can be seen as complex discourse in that they represent the oriental Other in a way that is not easily decodable. While the videos repeat and resemiotize aspects of the stereotypical and discriminatory Western heteronormative metanarratives of the Orient, they also depict the Other in ways in which his/her Otherness is no longer the simple anti-thesis of 'Us' – the western subject – but, occasionally, very much like 'Us'. To a large extent, we think that buffalaxed videos thrive on the tension between disparagement, on the one hand, and ambiguity and polyvalence, on the other. The question whether they only provide humorous entertainment for audiences, or whether they are at the same time seen as disparaging and discriminatory sometimes remains unresolved. After all, as Freud has reminded us in his discussion of the psychodynamics of jokes (as cited in Billig 2009: 34-35), in spite of the fact that we may think that we are laughing at the cleverness of a joke, in reality we cannot be quite sure whether we might be laughing because of its tendentious aspects, or, as in the case of buffalaxed videos, because we are enjoying its discriminatory aspects.

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# Mobility, voice, and symbolic restratification: An ethnography of 'elite migrants' in urban China<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this paper I explore class (re)stratification of the contemporary Chinese society through the use of various semiotic resources by a group of 'elite migrants' who are highly mobile within the country as well as globally. I identify two sets of semiotic resources and argue that they are different forms of voice articulating the different angles and directions of class distinction. The first set of resources are external criteria of group membership, expressed by their control of languages – Putonghua and English – that are not tied to one place but offer the mobility that characterizes their social class. The second set of resources are internal criteria of membership ('mensao') connected to and predicated on knowledge of particular consumption commodities. The fieldwork data demonstrate a multidimensional complex of voice, internal as well as external and with several scales being oriented towards. Through these resources the elite migrants create an identifiable 'middle class' voice in contemporary China.

## 1. Introduction

Social class is a highly contested notion in contemporary Chinese society because of its historical development; yet one observes the progressive formation of new social groups and hears articulation of class consciousness in everyday social practices (Lu 2002; Li 2007a, 2007b). A case in point here is that after 30 years of accelerated economic growth, a sizable new 'middle class' is emerging as a social layer in China, often consisting of people who have relocated to the country's urban centers such as Beijing and Shanghai with higher academic or professional qualifications. Given the peculiar historical development of China's social classes, it can be problematic to identify them using 'hard' criteria such as income,

occupation, education, and social origin. Consequently 'soft' criteria, e.g. semiotic resources, lifestyle, and taste, offer alternative perspectives into social classification. This paper investigates the deployment of semiotic resources by a group of highly mobile 'elite migrants', in an attempt to understand social change and class (re)stratification that characterize contemporary Chinese society.

The elite migrant participants of the present study are a group of Saab car possessors who have moved to and lived in Shanghai for a prolonged period of time, and have situated themselves in the middle strata of the host society. An expanding body of literature addresses the recent phenomenal migration inside China (Han, 2001; Lu & Zhang, 2001; Zhang, Qu & Zou, 2003; Fan, 2004, 2005; Lu, 2005; Woronov, 2004). And the linguistic aspects of labor migrants have attracted an increase of research attention (e.g. Dong 2009, 2011; Dong & Blommaert 2009, 2010). However, we know little about the socio-

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linguistic aspects of elite migrants, apart from the facts that they have a number of languages or language varieties at their disposal, and that they go through an upscaling process in which they are able to draw on their linguistic resources and negotiate their positions in the social order of the host society. Elite migrants often escape research attention in the field of sociolinguistics partly because we tend to emphasize marginality and inequality in migration studies. It becomes pressing to obtain a more in-depth understanding of elite migrants, especially when they bring diverse cultural and linguistic features, and together with labor migrants, transform urban centers into superdiverse metropolises (Vertovec 2006, 2007; Blommaert 2011a). Moreover, both types of migration, labor as well as elite migration, are part of a bigger and more general process – globalization – in which we observe fast flow of capital, people, goods, and information across country borders and across continents (Blommaert 2011b). Along with the increase of GDP and the development of a huge industrial proletariat, also elite migrants are a social and cultural effect of globalization in China.

In what follows, I shall distinguish two sets of semiotic resources that the elite migrant participants have control of: first, their linguistic repertoire of mobility, and second, the in-group discourses that flag their social distinction. Bringing the two sets of semiotic resources together, I shall demonstrate how different forms of voice articulate the different angles and directions of their class distinction. Before engaging with the fieldwork data, a brief sketch of the theoretical tools is in order.

## 2. Social (re)stratification and its 'soft' indicators

Different from that of Northern America or Western Europe where there are more or less established class systems, social class is a concept subject to heated debates among lay people as well as academics in contemporary China. The established view is that the state was born out of a proletarian revolution in the first half of the twentieth century, in which the proletariat seized public power and founded the nation on

the basis of the scientific socialism ideal of the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist tradition. During the thirty years or so of planned economy era (more or less between 1949 and 1979), class structure was rather neatly defined: a peasant class and an industrial working class which included a class fraction of intellectuals and the party cadres. Both classes belonged to the proletariat, and the means of production were turned into state property (Lu 2002; Li 2007a).

The economic reform of the 1980's however has posed theoretical as well as practical challenges to this class categorization. Theoretically, a social group which emerges out of the now partly privatized economy, and which thus has the control over the capital and over the means of production, can hardly fit into either class. Practically, we have witnessed reshuffles of classes and class fractions at least in three respects: first, the rapidly polarized distribution of power and social wealth has given birth to such groups as the 'new rich' and the 'privileged'; second, the glory of the working class that used to be emblematic of the advanced and revolutionary social force has quickly faded out, and in this process being an urban industrial worker is downscaled, at least in the eyes of lay people, from a source of prestige to an unwanted identity; third, the transitional period has created a special class fraction – rural-urban migrant workers. All of this is richly documented in the public and media debate in China: these issues are of concern to many contemporary Chinese (Dong 2011).

As for the middle class, the debates are centered around the question of how to define it. A remarkable similarity shared among the middle class is their *denial* of middle class membership. 'I am not rich enough' and 'there is no middle class in China' are among the most frequently given answers. Because there is no widely accepted criterion in China, they compare themselves to the middle class of the United States and conclude that, if measured against the US standards, there is no middle class in China. Perhaps confusion surrounding the term is not unique to China, but it is remarkable in China because of its communist orthodoxies in the past and of the theoretical difficulties the term poses to the

social frame at present. Another term 'people of middle income' (zhongdeng shouru zhe) is often used in the mass media and other public and official discourses (Li 2007a, 2007b). This term however is inadequate, at least for a social scientist, because income does not necessarily coincide with social class, and members of middle class may not fall into the middle income distribution of a society.

It is beyond the scope of the present research to conclusively define the Chinese middle class; yet it is safe to say that there is a group of people, and perhaps a very large group, who socio-economically fall between the working class and the (relatively small but powerful) 'upper class' of ultra-rich in contemporary Chinese society. In addition, following Bourdieu (1984), the middle class will define itself by means of specific activities – class praxis – reflecting and fortifying class consciousness. Such activities include forms of consumption, the discursive and semiotic expression and display of 'taste' in a variety of cultural and consumer domains, and these activities will be of particular interest here.

Taste, according to Bourdieu (1984), is an acquired disposition towards cultural goods and practices, both reflective and formative of social class positions. It is closely related to education level and social origins. The formulation and articulation of individual taste is through a scheme of habitus, the socialized body that is progressively inscribed with social structure in the course of individual and collective history. Taste is the systematic expressions of habitus, and in the life-style related sub-spaces such as furniture, clothing, language, food, body hexis people tend to display fairly consistent disposition and practices.

'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu 1984:6). It therefore functions as a 'soft' indicator that produces social groups and marks space boundaries by bringing certain people together and keeping others apart. A working class man would find spending big money on a wedding party wasteful, but such expenditures could be a prime necessity and obligatory elements to middle class people. The latter might see the costly wedding party a successful invest-

ment in social capital and in networking, which consequently generates social as well as physical separation of life spaces (1984:375). Taste groups people and posits them in certain circles and spaces by means of complexes of recognizable, emblematic features of behavior, comportment, consumption and speech (cf. also Blommaert & Varis 2012).

Another notion used in this paper is voice, an aspect of the way in which the semiotic resources are deployed. The concept of voice has a complex history of development and has acquired diverse meanings and models of application along its ways of formation. One main theoretical source is the Bakhtinian notion of voice which distinguishes social voice from individual voice and emphasizes the social dimension of this notion (Bakhtin 1981, 1984). Another line of conceptualizing voice emphasizes the form-function relationships. This can be traced back to Jakobson's structuralism, and it is more clearly formulated in Hymes's (1964) and Gumperz's (1982) work. Following this tradition, Blommaert (2005: 68) argues that voice is primarily the capacity to make oneself understood by others. It is, in other words, the capacity to realize intended functions by mobilizing semiotic resources available to oneself, the capacity of people to create preferred interactional effects by mapping semiotic forms onto functions. Blommaert and others underscore that voice fundamentally is a social issue complicated by globalization, because the mobility of semiotic instruments and skills in a globalized context always affects the functional efficacy of these resources. Mobility and space hence become pressing concerns for voice in a globalized context (cf. Blommaert & Dong 2010; Dong & Blommaert 2009).

Some linguistic resources, such as standard accents, are highly mobile and index prestige, whereas others are stigmatizing and strictly locked in local and private domains. As Hymes (1996) and Blommaert (2005) define it, voice always happens in combination with power effects and with the risk of not being understood. Voice exists because of 'non-voice': "such a capacity [viz., being able to make oneself understood] is not self-evident [...] [it] is subject to sev-

eral conditions and constraints [...] when people move through physical and social space [...] they move through orders of indexicality affecting their ability to deploy communicative resources" (Blommaert 2005: 68-69). An example of being 'voice-less' can be found in Dong and Blommaert (2009) which describes an episode that a migrant worker – a cleaner who worked in a urban recreation center in a middle class residential neighborhood in Beijing – was effectively silenced by her urban interlocutors. The elite migrants of this study also display subtle and complex voices, perhaps less straightforward in terms of power effects and constraints of their own voices, but it is useful to consider the voice problem they create for others who do not have access to the highly mobile linguistic resources. Let us take a close look at the elite migrants and their voices.

### 3. Situating the group and data collection

The data of the present research are drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork between 2010 and 2012 among a group of elite migrants who share a common feature of driving Saab cars in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen. The group members are scattered in various cities because they initially are brought to each other from an online forum in which they exchange technical information on Saab cars, driving experiences, as well as their passion for the brand. Their interactions gradually become 'offline' around 2009 when they discover more similarities among themselves than just their shared preference for a brand of automobiles. For instance, they all play golf, they travel abroad frequently, each of the male members smokes cigars and has a handsome collection of wines. A majority of them hold foreign academic diplomas and have spent prolonged period of time in another country. Another factor that lead the participants to form a circle is that Saab car dealers lower the price in the Chinese market in 2009, and therefore Saab cars become more affordable to those who are 'not exactly the same type of people'. Interestingly, it seems when Saab becomes more democratic, the group – the earlier generation of Saab fans – creates exclusivity by adding more features of exclusivity such as traveling, golf, cigars,

etc. More features, in other words, become part of the 'register' of identity they construct. It is no longer enough just to be a Saab fan, one now needs to show and perform all the enregistered features of distinction in an ordered way to create identity (Blommaert & Varis 2011).

Sociolinguistically Shanghai has its distinct language variety – Shanghainese – an umbrella term for the vernaculars spoken in Shanghai and its adjunct area. It is mutually unintelligible with other Chinese languages and language varieties, for instances Mandarin and Cantonese. Shanghainese used to be a regional lingua franca, given the economic power of its speakers since the late Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 A.D.), until the recent introduction of Putonghua as a national linguistic standard (Dong 2010). Moreover, the large number of internal migrants have profoundly changed the 'linguistic landscape' of the city. Shanghai is one of the largest and richest cities in China. Of its 23 million plus inhabitants, more than two fifths are immigrants from other part of the country, many from surrounding regions such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, but increasingly from farther provinces such as Henan, Sichuan, and Jiangxi<sup>2</sup>. Internal migrants bring along diverse linguistic and cultural belongings and turn to Putonghua as a common platform of effective communication (Lei 2009; Tsou 2009; Van den Berg 2009; Xu 2009; Yu 2009). Though shrinking to the largely private domain of social life, Shanghainese still serves as a strong marker of local identity, and perhaps still is a symbolic source for pride among a relatively small number of 'pure' Shanghainese people (Hu 1995).

About half of the elite participants are 'pure' Shanghainese people, and the other half originally are from various part of the country. The immediate context of this paper is a wedding party of a Saab group member. The newly-wed couple invited their guests to a golf resort in suburban Shanghai where the ceremony was held. There were more than 200 guests, and about one third stayed overnight. Apart from the expenditures of the ceremony and banquet, all hotel

<sup>2</sup> The sixth national population census <http://www.stats.gov.cn/zgrkpc/dlc/>. Last viewed on 27 Dec 2011.

rooms of the guests were provided by the couple. Such a luxurious wedding might sound unnecessarily expensive to many; but for the couple, it perhaps was, in the Bourdieuan fashion, an inevitable investment in social capital with foreseeable materialization. The couple generously allowed my participation to the event as an ethnographic researcher. I was able to observe the event, to participate in the activities, to collect documents such as leaflets, and to interview the guests. All participants gave their consent to the use of data in reporting the research results and in the possible publication

I managed to interview 5 participants in length (about 2 hours each), plus a number of shorter interviews (ranging between 5 and 30 minutes) of individuals and groups. Interviews were conducted in an informal conversation-like manner, and the topics were organized around their life history and their perceptions of life-style, hobbies, social class, and language varieties such as Putonghua, English, Shanghai local dialect, and their home dialects (e.g. the Northeast dialects, the Henan dialects). All interviewees involved in the present research happen to be male, because the Saab group are overwhelmingly male. The interviews were carried out in Putonghua right before, during, or immediately after the wedding ceremony. I translated the transcripts in English. Other data types included observed episodes recorded in my field notes, online digital data on and around this group, documents collected during and beyond the weddings.

I have addressed the issue of the class stratification and its 'soft' indicators in the Chinese context – or more specifically, in the urban centers such as Shanghai; we situate the group of participants in the macro social and linguistic contexts of contemporary Shanghai, as well as in the micro contexts of a costly wedding in a golf course of suburban Shanghai. Their symbolic restratifying behavior revolves around a cluster of features and details, of which the semiotic resources are one part. Next I shall illustrate the two sets of semiotic resources ② repertoire of mobility and in-group discourses – through interview data and online documents produced by and for the group.

#### 4. Repertoires of mobility

Linguistic resources are never distributed in a random way. In every society, varieties of language, genres, styles and registers are distributed according to the logic of the social system, and sociolinguistic analysis has from its inception addressed these non-random aspects of distribution (cf. Hymes 1996). Turning to linguistic resources, therefore, can lead us straight into the heart of class stratification and restratification in China.

The first set of resources is the participants' linguistic repertoire of mobility. The group members distinguish themselves by means of repertoires of mobility, articulated in two directions. First, they have adopted Putonghua, the national linguistic standard, which offers them pan-Chinese mobility. Second, they have acquired English which offers them global mobility. Let us first take a look at the interview of a group member on his evaluations of Shanghainese, his home dialect (a Northeastern accent), and Putonghua.

##### 4.1 *Language of internal-Chinese mobility*

Interviewee C is a senior manager working in the financial industry. He is in his early forties. He spends his youth in Dalian, a coastal city in the Northeastern China, obtains his bachelor degree in Shanghai, goes on to the UK for post-graduate education, and returns to Shanghai ten years ago. His leisure activities include playing golf with business partners and friends, smoking cigars, reading books. He is married and has two children.

Extract 1: 'I don't feel like speaking Shanghainese'<sup>3</sup>

- 1 DJ: So do you {nin您 the respect form of ,you'} speak Shanghainese?
- 2 Interviewee C: No I don't {quick reply, different from his usual slow pace of utterance}.

<sup>3</sup> Transcription conventions:

- ' ' (underline) stress
- '=' interruption or next utterance following immediately
- { } transcriber's comment
- \* \* segment quieter than surrounding talk, or weaker than the rest of the sentence
- { } omitted part in the utterance

- 3 DJ: You did your undergraduate study in Shanghai?
- 4 Interviewee C: \*That's right\*.
- 5 DJ: Didn't you have to learn Shanghainese when you were in college, being here for so many years?
- 6 Interviewee C: Well, (I) \*rather\* reject...
- 7 DJ: Reject learning Shanghainese?
- 8 Interviewee C: No, just I \*don't feel like speaking\* (Shanghainese)
- 9 DJ: Then do you feel inconvenient sometimes?
- 10 Interviewee C: \*I don't\* feel that way.
- 11 DJ: In your daily life, go shopping... and so on?
- 12 Interviewee C: Nope, it's fine \*as long as (we) understand\* (each other).  
...
- 13 DJ: You just said you don't like the language, why is that?
- 14 Interviewee C: It is a personal thing. Shanghainese isn't masculine enough, so I never really made any effort to learn it. And (I am) a bit rebellious, many people want to squeeze into Shanghai, want to learn Shanghainese, my college mate, a big bloke from the North {make noises and gestures mimicking a big guy learning the rather 'feminine' speech; laughing voice of DJ and the interviewee} did his best to learn Shanghainese, in order to 'integrate' (to the local society), it is the same with us who were abroad, deliberately learn their accent, a 'pure' London accent, it is too deliberate, and I don't feel like that, language is a communicative tool  
...
- 15 DJ: Do you ever feel you are a Shanghainese?
- 16 Interviewee C: (hesitant) I am, I am, I am quite confused, what should I be, the boundaries of regions and countries become rather vague... but it is true that 'in one place, people are alike (yifang shuitu yang yifang ren)', their language, their characteristics, their temper, and so on, there are similarities, but more is individual differences I would say... I find it difficult to define

where I came from, my father was from Anhui, my mother is a Manchu people, and I used to live in various places too. I spent about 15 or 16 years in Dalian, but it's been long (since I left there), I don't really like the culture there.

[Fieldwork recording-2011-12-09-V21-28:00]

The interview is a fragment of metapragmatic discourse of an elite migrant on his perceptions of local Shanghainese, of the culture of his home town, and of his identities. This example is primarily concerned with the voice of Interviewee C – his way of articulating meaning in a given social environment – but in his utterances, we can distinguish voices of his college mate and voices circulated at a public level as meaning making moments. As a whole, it shows the relationships between Shanghainese and Interviewee C's home dialect, and Putonghua is seen as the 'background color' taken for granted in the conversation. The interview can be analyzed into three parts according to the style of the interviewee's utterance. The first part (turn 1-12) consists of quick turns and short answers. This is a negotiation stage of interview in which the ethnographer is eager to draw out more detailed answers whereas the interviewee adopts a defensive mode and withdraws to a safe zone by giving brief responses such as 'That's right' (turn 4), and 'I don't feel that way' (turn 10). I use the polite form of the second person pronoun 'nin (您, you)', instead of the usual 'ni (你, you)', in order to show him my respect, but it is also my attempt to stress that I am harmless and that he could be less defensive in talking to me. Though Interviewee C gives quick and short answers in this part, his utterances are produced in a low and slow manner, which may signal hesitation and being careful in giving opinions. However, there is something unusual in turn 2: he gives a quick and definite answer 'No I don't' to my question whether he could speak Shanghainese. He moves to Shanghai in his late teens, spends significant years both before and after

his UK period, and therefore one would expect that the local language had become part of his linguistic repertoire. He perhaps has considered it, inferred from his unusually quick reply, and might feel strongly about it. He uses a strong word 'rejected (paichi, 排斥)' to voice his idea about learning Shanghainese (turn 6).

In part two (turn 14) our conversation proceeds to a more comfortable stage marked by longer and more fluent responses given by Interviewee C. He articulates an elaborated comment on Shanghainese and explains two reasons of rejecting the language. The first reason is related to the stereotypical ideas circulated in lay people towards Shanghainese, that Shanghainese is rather 'feminine', and it therefore is not a language for him, a man from the Northeast. In the sociocultural geography of China, there are regions that have stereotypical attributes such as the Northeast being a place for 'real men' as opposed to the 'effeminate' South (Long 1998). Note that such metadiscursive labels personify speech and impose social distinction by connecting sound patterns to attributes of speakers (cf. Agha 2003).

The second reason, related to the first one, comes from a negative reaction to the prevailing phenomenon that many people attempt to establish themselves in Shanghai and to 'become' Shanghai people. Entering the city, however, does not automatically qualify one as a local. Accent usually is a remarkable and persistent marker of social space, and in order to achieve a locally ratified identity, one has to be able to speak the local language in a 'proper' way. The 'big bloke' – Interviewee C's college mate – makes serious efforts to learn Shanghainese in order to achieve a local identity. Here we differentiate another voice (in Bakhtin's sense), a mixture of Shanghainese with a Northern accent represented in an amusing way, and this performance triggers laughter. Presenting an accent in an amusing way in fact disqualifies it; rarely would anyone suggest Putonghua being 'funny' or 'terrible' – Putonghua is just 'normal' (Dong 2010; cf. Silverstein 1996 for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in American English). While others are eager to acquire the local language

and to achieve a local identity, Interviewee C is able to bypass such boundaries by the use of Putonghua in the process of establishing himself in the urban center. His rejection of Shanghainese can be seen as part of the distinction: I am in Shanghai as an 'elite' migrant, which is why I don't speak the local vernacular.

Part three (turn 16) is concerned with Interviewee C's complicated migration trajectory and the evaluation on his own identities. Being asked on identity-related questions, Interviewee C resumes his slow pace of articulation and hesitates for about three seconds before giving his answer. He rejects a Shanghai identity, and one expects that he would claim an identity of Dalian where he spent most of his youth. However, he is critical toward the culture of Dalian and does not ascribe a Dalian identity to himself. Throughout the interview he hardly shows any trace of Dalian accent. This historical trace of locality has been erased. Putonghua has been the language that enables him to move to and live in various places within the country, including his prolonged stay in Shanghai. Earlier he explicitly rejects Shanghai local vernacular and the identity indexed by the language; and here he actively articulates distance from his home culture. It is clear that he rejects a particular regional identity; his preferred language – Putonghua – signals his distinction: he is not locked into a specific place, he is mobile all over China. Putonghua therefore appears to be the language of pan-Chinese mobility, the linguistic resource of a growing class of professionals whose specialized labor can be deployed in any part of China.

#### *4.2 The language of global mobility*

While Putonghua is the language of internal mobility, English is another mobility related resource that distinguishes the elite migrants from most other people. One of the recurrent topics of the elite participants is the choice of emigration to another country. It is reported that of the 1,070,000 plus people who have studied abroad since 1978, merely one forth return to China (Zhang 2011). With the recent US policies of attracting foreign investments to revive its economy, comes a new policy of legal

migration into the US. One can obtain a US permanent resident permit upon spending more than 50,000 USD in the US to purchase a house<sup>4</sup>. 'Becoming an American' seems to have become a cheaper and easier way<sup>5</sup> of getting out of China, compared to the traditional route of obtaining a foreign diploma and competing in the labor market of the host society. Other immigration destinations such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are also attractive to those who can afford it. Let us look at an elite interviewee's evaluation on emigration.

Extract 2: 'Sooner or later to send my child abroad'

- 1 Interviewee P: Well, about this (emigration), anyway, hmm, it is also something I am puzzled, a confusing factor, (I am) hesitating (about it), actually deep in my heart I feel I am a Chinese, although there are many problems here (in China)... but being here doesn't mean (we can) pass (the good things) onto (our children), so I am not clear about that, anyway, emigration is something to do sooner or later, the question is when
- 2 DJ: Emigration is something to do sooner or later
- 3 Interviewee P: Yea, at least it is sooner or later (for me) to send my child (abroad). (I) have to consider many factors, of course economic factors, there are more opportunities to make money in China.

[Fieldwork recording-2011-12-09-V22-1:00:42]

In this short piece of interview extract, Interviewee P gives rich information on the push and pull factors of emigration. Similar to Interviewee C, Interviewee P is a professional in the financial industry. He is around forty, and he has spent more than ten years in Shanghai. This interview is triggered by the conversations of several group members, in which emigration is a recurrent topic that raised debates and arguments. I there-

<sup>4</sup> Information collected from conversations among the elite participants.

<sup>5</sup> One could hardly afford a one bedroom flat in Beijing or Shanghai with 50,000 USD.

fore decide to modify the interview plan and ask him about his perceptions of emigration.

Among the various factors that Interviewee P has to take in to consideration, providing his children with a better education appears to be a decisive reason for emigration. In a transitional society such as China today, while the poor are struggling to move upwards to the middle ranges of society, people who are already in the middle layer have to ensure their social position by moving further up (Dong 2011). One way of maintaining their social status is to maximize their economic and cultural capital and to make the most out of the educational system. Consequently we observe that parents and children collectively enter a ruthless race for academic qualification from kindergarten onward at an individual level, and at a societal level, an increasingly competitive labor market (cf. Bourdieu 1984:132). The notorious 'commercialization of education provision' makes this even worse. One possibility of escaping such competition is to send young children to elite private schools and have them prepared for the US SAT or the UK A-Levels, rather than the Chinese National University Entrance Examination. This route is extremely costly, but the elite migrants who not only are mobile within China, but also mobile at a global scale, find it a real prospect for them, because they have acquired the language of global mobility: English. Elite migrants articulate a clear understanding of how moving up the scale of globalization involves moving up its sociolinguistic scale as well, and that English, consequently, is a requirement for such upscaling moves. As Interviewee P points out, that 'it is sooner or later (for me) to send my child (abroad)' (turn 3). His knowledge of English, as well as his global experience, are necessary conditions which enable him to realistically consider the prospect of emigration, at least emigration of his children. And only those who have English in their linguistic repertoire can entertain such ideas realistically. English is acquired in their personal histories of mobility, and it enables their further and continued mobility globally.

Apart from emigration, there are various other forms of global mobility that the elite migrants demonstrate through their use of English in the



Figure 1: Mixture of English and Chinese in the online forum

Translation:  
 TOP GEAR 18 shows a test of SAAB 9-5, the petrol consumption is amazingly low [smily face]  
 Almost 4l/100KM.  
 Fxxk GM...

[This message is edited by vspy at 16:07 12-02-2012]

wedding party and beyond. For instance, Figure 1 shows a mixture of English and Chinese used in an entry of the online Saab discussion forum. English is used for the blogger’s user ID (vspy), the name of the British television series about motor vehicles (TOP GEAR), Saab, and the American automobile producer GM.

The blogger discusses a Top Gear episode<sup>6</sup> which highlights the low petrol consumption of a Saab car. Interestingly, Top Gear is not broadcasted from Chinese official TV stations, and thus its fans can only download it from the Internet. Moreover, the episodes accessible from the Internet do not have Chinese subtitles, and that requires its viewers to have a high level of English proficiency as well as of cultural background knowledge in order to understand what is going on. In the virtual world where movement seems to be freer and easier, there are also barriers, maybe less salient, but people still have to mobilize resources such as English in order to access information of the other part of the world, to achieve effective communication or to voice their opinions.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/v1V\\_\\_Zh\\_YHg/](http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/v1V__Zh_YHg/) the online episode of Top Gear 18-1. Last viewed on 15 Feb 2012.

Another example of trying to have their voice heard globally through English is the group members’ recent efforts in ‘Save Saab’ from bankruptcy. When Saab filed for bankruptcy, the Chinese Saab owners displayed tremendous brand loyalty and publicly pledged to save Saab (Figure 2).



Figure 2: ‘SAVE SAAB’ gathering

While all participants are Chinese, interestingly, the slogans are bilingual, and the majority part is in English: in the big red banner, English is ahead of Chinese, and only English can be found in the various smaller signs. It is highly possible that the participants are voicing their opinions not (only) to a Chinese audience – although the photo is circulated widely in the Chinese webpages and online forums – but also to a global audience, to a worldwide community of Saab fans, to the Sweden car manufacturer, and to the US and the

Dutch owners of the brand. Moreover, it voices the particular identity of the participants – passionate supporters and possessors of a global brand of high-end automobiles – and drawing on English gives this identity a real global relevance.

The data presented so far show that the elite migrants have acquired the language of national mobility – Putonghua – in their linguistic repertoire and thus claim a pan-Chinese identity. They also have the language of global mobility – English – at their disposal so that they are able to access information which is otherwise exclusive to Chinese people, to voice their opinions as well as identities, and to see emigration as a realistic prospect. They therefore are mobile at a pan-Chinese scale due to their capacity in Putonghua, and they are mobile globally due to English at their disposal. I therefore define their repertoires as repertoires of mobility at various scale-levels, which points back to their personal histories of mobility and forwards to their continued mobility. Further, these resources – the first set of resources discussed in this paper – shape conditions for voice in relation to out-groups: the resources enable mobile voices, voices that can speak and be heard anywhere and are not ‘placed’ or confined to a particular place.

### 5 Markers of in-group discourses

The second set of resources is in-group discourse, that is, particular ways of speaking about themselves that flag their distinction. A remarkable in-group marker that appeared recurrently in the conversations of the elite migrants is a Chinese word ‘mensao (闷骚)’. In the interviews a number of the elite migrants explicitly referred to the word in an attempt to explain their choice of Saab car as well as their ‘choice’ of each other as member of a group. The word therefore emerges from the data pool as an important element, a key to understand their in-group dynamics, or a discursive resource that posits them in the particular social order (Kroon & Sturm 2007).

‘Mensao’ refers to both males and females who appear to be calm and inconspicuous but deep inside they are extremely passionate and are able to explode into performance if required.

It is a kind of ‘coolness’ highly valued among the group members. Let us take a look at how Interviewee A constructed it in the following interview extract.

#### Extract 3: ‘Mensao (闷骚)’

- 1 ..... {noise, laughters in the hall, people chatting on the phone, wedding in preparation, people checking in their hotel rooms}
- 2 DJ: So what are the similarities of this circle of people?
- 3 Interviewee : You mean us?
- 4 DJ: = hmm.
- 5 Interviewee A: = How should I put it, to put it straightforwardly, it is the personality of \*‘mensao (闷骚)’\* {smiling voice, lower voice than the rest of the utterance, excited, a mixture of being embarrassed and being proud}
- 6 Interviewee A: Hehehe{laughing loudly}
- 7 DJ: {laughing with a low voice}
- 8 Interviewee A: That is to say {his tone becomes calmer and more serious}, people of our circle are not those who love to show off their wealth, everyone is rather sincere, that’s about it, everyone, inside everyone, it’s not arrogant, but deep inside (we are) quite self confident, and we want to show (ourselves), but not show off openly, Saab is like that
- 9 DJ: = not flaunting...
- 10 Interviewee A: = yeah not flaunting. And yeah Saab is like that, the appearance of Saab car isn’t very attractive, but its technical advantages, its performance, really fast when accelerating... there is another side (of Saab), but (both Saab and us) don’t like showing off, because of the shared characteristics, we feel comfortable of each other’s company

[Fieldwork recording-2011-12-10-V31-3:31]

Interviewee A is in his early thirties and works as a senior manager in the financial industry. He has been in Shanghai since 2003 when he returns from the UK, has obtained his undergraduate diploma from a prestige British university, and

acquired his initial work experiences in the financial City of London. He originally is from Henan province of central China. The interview is centered around 'mensao' as a shared characteristic of the group members as well as the attractiveness of a Saab car to its fans. Immediately prior to the interview, Interviewee A is talking about the price of Saab cars, and for that price, one could have opted for BMW or Mercedes. Saab in actual fact is much less known and stylistically understated. This evaluation thus leads to the interview topic. Before spelling out the word 'mensao', Interviewee A is calm and smooth in speaking, with a flat tone. However, he becomes a little hesitant while searching for a word 'How should I put it' in turn 5, and quickly 'to put it straightforwardly'. This moment of hesitation indicates that he is trying to find a more indirect way of labeling him and his fellow group members, but realizes that there is no better word than the 'mensao'. It is possible that he is considering whether I, the researcher, is a harmless person with whom he could be 'straightforward'. He spells out the word with a voice that is lower than the rest of his utterance, as if he is telling me a secret. Moreover, his loud laughter (turn 6) right after pronouncing the word is rather sudden, and perhaps too loud, which signals a sense of embarrassment. In fact such reaction is found in every interview while the elite migrants are trying to describe themselves: hesitation, pronouncing the word 'mensao', and giggling or loud laughter. It is clear that the word points to subtle but important in-group meanings that are not normally shared by outsiders such as the researcher.

Therefore 'mensao' is a particular kind of 'coolness' they constructed, and that they modeled on the coolness they saw in Saab cars. Interviewee A describes their kind of 'coolness' in turn 8 and says that 'Saab is like that', and he repeats this point in turn 10 'there is another side (of Saab), but (both Saab and us) don't like showing off'. 'Mensao' therefore is not only the shared characteristic of the group members but also that of the Saab car. Interestingly, a Saab commercial constructed a similar image (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Saab car ad: Release me

Figure 3 shows a Saab commercial released in 2007<sup>7</sup>. The English slogan 'Release Me' is the title of the commercial song which tells a story of longing for passion and freedom. Its Chinese equivalence '释放无可抵挡' (shifang wukedi-dang) means 'set me free, nothing can stop me'. In the photo a silver-colored Saab car, shining its front lights, is in motion and stirs up a wave of clear blue water. The commercial (the photo, the song, the commercial music video) projects an image of 'coolness', 'passion', and 'longing for freedom' to the car. The car owners internalize these qualities into their own habitus, and tend to think of these images as a reflection their personality features. They not only buy a Saab car. They develop their identities in relation to consumption patterns, that is to say, they convert a consumption act (purchasing a car) into an identity act of the consumer (something that can reveal 'who I am'). The group members have a shared taste and this taste leads them to the car and to each other. Taste is like a match-maker 'it marries colors and also people... two people can give each other no better proof of the affinity of their tastes than the tastes they have for each other' (Bourdieu 1984:243). Taste organizes social as well as physical space so that some people are brought together – such as the group members – and others are separated. Marcuse (1964) argued in 'one-dimensional man' that the European and US middle classes increasingly organized their identities with reference to consumption patterns (Blommaert & Varis 2011). The Saab group members who mark themselves 'mensao' serve as an explicit illustration of how

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/ivBGB-POY9i8/>. Last viewed on 16-02-2012.

people model and describe themselves in relation to features of a commodity, a Saab car.

Consequently the second set of resources I have discussed in this paper is the particular kind of in-group discourse, instantiated by and revolving around the word 'mensao', in articulating the desired personality features projected by their consumption patterns which distinguish them from outsiders. These personality features are explicitly organized according to a comparison with Saab cars. These discursive and identity resources shape conditions for in-group voice: this is the register by means of which they self-identify and shape, identify and evaluate behavioral expectations in their own group.

## 6 Conclusions

I have identified two sets of semiotic resources and argued that they are different forms of voice and articulate the different angles and directions of class distinction: (a) external criteria of membership, expressed by their control of resources that are not tied to one place but offer the mobility that characterizes their class; (b) internal criteria of membership ('mensao') connected to and predicated on knowledge of particular consumption commodities, here: Saab cars. We see, in sum, a multidimensional complex of voice, internal as well as external and with several scales being oriented towards. It is through the resources discussed here that the Saab friends create an identifiable 'middle class' voice in contemporary China. They acquire and display prestige linguistic resources such as Putonghua and English, and they develop a particular in-group register for talking among as well as about themselves. As we can see, these 'soft' resources are anchored in a more objective range of factors: elite consumption patterns, international educational backgrounds and prestige functions in very well-paid industrial branches. The 'hard' diacritics of class need to be – and will be, according to Bourdieu – reflected in an ordered range of 'soft' diacritics by means of which these people create and maintain class boundaries between themselves and others.

Significantly, what sets this group apart is *mobility* across different scale levels. They are mobile within China and they are also members of a globally mobile community who can entertain plans for leisure travel abroad as well as emigration to other parts of the world. Class stratification appears to be strongly connected to the potential for mobility one can realistically claim. The 'soft' capital offering such forms of mobility is lodged in specific linguistic repertoires, and thus in the capacity of these people to make themselves understood in various places, in different social environments and across the different scale-levels that are involved in global professional and personal mobility.

Needless to say, this mobility potential is still an exclusive commodity in contemporary China. The rapid expansion of the class of well-paid young urban professionals must not obscure that most Chinese are not in a position now to entertain realistic plans of international mobility; this fact is not likely to change in the near future. A mobile group of people – people for whom mobility is a possible choice rather than a necessity – is something that reshuffles the social hierarchies of contemporary China. It re-stratifies China both by means of new forms of distribution of 'hard' resources – income, economic power – and 'soft' resources such as language varieties and discourses of the self and of the way the world is. Sociolinguistic attention to such 'soft' resources and their patterns of distribution is therefore, not very surprisingly, a rather sensitive tool for understanding the rapid social changes and the increasing social and cultural diversification of China.

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# Translating global experience into institutional models of competency: linguistic inequalities in the job interview

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## Abstract

The job interview is a key gatekeeping site where the tension between institutional standards and diversity is most evident. Despite equal opportunity policies, the linguistic demands of the interview are more likely to exclude migrants from work in the higher tier labour market. The selection interview creates a linguistic penalty against certain migrant groups and this is well illustrated in the problem of foreign work experience (FWE), its recognition or not, the limitations of its use and the additional communicative demands it creates. Using examples taken from a data base of 61 video-recorded UK interviews for low-paid jobs, this paper shows the discursive regimes that position migrant applicants as less capable within the competence-based interview. FWE can be dismissed by interviewers or, where it is accepted, requires additional linguistic and interactional work to manage the extra contextual and equivalences burden. The unfamiliarity or assumed irrelevance of FWE is brought into the interview, and its power to distance and 'other' candidates of migrant background is brought about interactionally as candidates' linguistic resources in defending it are made vulnerable under the interviewers' gaze. By contrast, British born candidates, whatever their social identity, can use their local work experience to tell stories that fit with the competency framework. The language of job interviews contributes to the production of inequality and also masks the contradiction between apparent fairness and unequal outcomes.

Keywords: job interview, competency, foreign work experience, linguistic penalty, discursive regimes.

## Introduction

A central contradiction in the way institutions manage and defend themselves is that between standardisation and responding to diversity. On the one hand, they are expected to regulate their procedures so that they can be defended as objective and consistent but, on the other, they are required to acknowledge, be responsive to and even celebrate the fact of difference in their workforces. The job interview is a key gatekeeping site where this contradiction has to be managed and its outcomes defended as fair. The role of foreign work experience (FWE) within the interview is a telling case of how these tensions are played out as candidates from migrant groups present their past. FWE is problematic in

the British job interview in three different ways: firstly, the unfamiliarity and assumed lack of fit of FWE, secondly, the central role of stories of past experience in the current discursive regimes of the interview, and thirdly, the additional linguistic capital required to deal with both of these.

This paper will a) discuss the *linguistic penalty* that the current discursive regimes of selection interviewing have produced; b) consider how competency frameworks require convincing stories of past work experience and how these imply a blend of institutional and personal discourses and are underpinned by current discourses of diversity; c) examine how FWE is either dismissed or, in its negotiation, puts additional contextual and equivalences burdens on candidates

from migrant groups; d) contrast the negotiation of FWE with the valuing of local work experience; and e) in conclusion, suggest that the linguistic regulation of the job interview masks the tensions it creates.<sup>1</sup>

First, we will look at an example of a candidate, Suhil, originally from India, who is applying for a

job as a receptionist in a hospital department where he will be dealing with patients and their records. He is typical of candidates born abroad applying for low-paid work in that most of his work experience was not in the UK and he is a graduate (with an MA):

#### Example 1

(See below for transcription conventions. These examples show not only the words of the interview but also how both sides interact together ie how they take turns, interrupt or overlap each other's talk etc. since these are aspects of behaviour crucial to the judgement of candidates and to the production of comfortable or uncomfortable moments.)

1. I: If you werent successful would you (.) um (.) like to be considered for .h a
2. position behind the scenes
3. S: well [f-
4. I: or ] are you [specifically
5. S: For me] its not [very important]
6. I: patient ok]
7. S: whether Im working behind the scene or in front of the scene hh actually
8. speaking because I worked as a ward clerk Ive handled the reception Ive got
9. two years working=
10. I: =Yeah I [understand that
11. S: experience also] so Im not afraid of anything
12. I: But thats obviously [in India
13. S: right]
14. I: not here ((laughs loudly))
15. S: ((nods)) thats in India yeah
16. All: (laughter)
17. S: But patients are patients
18. I: ((Clears throat loudly)) ((looks at interviewer 2 still laughing)) [debatable
19. I2: well ( )]
20. S: Im not here to debate because you are more experienced
21. I: Yeah
22. S: So I dont because (.) obviously I mean I-I'm here to give my best=
23. I2: =mhmm=
24. I: =[yeah I appreciate that
25. S: and Im here to convince you] if I if Im able to convince you
26. Im\_fortunate if Im (.) I cannot convince you Im [unfortunate
27. I: Yeah]=
28. I2: =mhmm=

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on two research projects funded by the Department of Work and Pensions: *Talk on Trial* (2006) and *Talking Like a Manager* (2008). While the discussion of competency-based interview draws on both projects, the examples and the main argu-

ment are largely based on *Talk on Trial*, which looks at selection interviews and low paid work in: supermarkets, a delivery company, a hospital, a further education college, a food processing company, and a manufacturing company.

Suhil is being assessed on his competence in dealing with people, one of a set of typical competences which currently regulate the British job interview. These competency frameworks are designed around past experience but in this case, Suhil's foreign work experience is dismissed at lines 12 and 18, despite his attempts to show its relevance. The interviewer response 'debatable' appears to leave Suhil with nowhere to go within the competency framework. Instead, he grasps at the apparent cue to 'debate' the issue, which leads to a sequence where he shifts from the conventional display of relevant past experience to a commentary on his role in the interview. This has no place within the discursive regimes of the job interview since it does not conform to its rules of evidence.

#### **Discursive regimes and the *Linguistic penalty***

In order to comply with equal opportunities legislation, organisations are expected to produce rational, accountable and standard bureaucratic procedures along Weberian lines (du Gay 2000) aimed at ensuring equality in the judgement of individuals. Weber's arguments for objective and rational forms of work were in part designed to cater for what were already perceived in the mid-twentieth century as increasingly diverse societies, helping to create, for example, fair and objective procedures in selection processes. However, these modernist goals of objectivity and accountability have produced their own inequalities since they require competence in institutional talk and text, the special reasoning and inferencing that goes with understanding how institutions work and the modes of talk to display this. Such knowledge is, of course, not equally distributed among all groups and those with least access to it are most disadvantaged.

The gatekeeping interview is a product of these standardised procedures and its formal processes are an example of increasingly *textualised* (Iedema and Scheeres 2003) and language-mediated gatekeeping encounters (Erickson and Shultz 1982, Gumperz 1982b), each one producing its own discursive regimes. This is starkly illustrated in the regulation of migrant groups through gatekeeping encounters for the right

to asylum (Jacquemet 2005, Blommaert 2001, Maryns 2006), the offer of a work permit (Codó 2008), and the selection for internship (Traenker forthcoming).

The selection interview is no exception to this trend. Two contrasting tropes used in the prevailing discourses of job selection in the UK sum up the language loading that these processes now bear. In the 1960s it was commonplace to hear recruiters talking of 'a pair of hands' to fill a job, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the 'language of talent' with its celebratory image of the successful communicator had superseded it. Discourses of mission statements, the regulation of human resources through competency frameworks, guidelines for the structuring and managing of job interviews, and the length of such interviews even for low-paid work, are all evidence of this languaging work.<sup>2</sup> So, for example, 'How does an organisation manage change?' asked at an interview for a low-paid job, puts a large inferencing load on the candidate to get from this huge and complex question to the key competence of 'flexibility' and whether the candidate can show that she or he is flexible. There is then the question of whether candidates can attune to this notion of flexibility as highly significant and how it can be demonstrated in their response, using work experience that is familiar enough to the interviewer to provide evidence of this competence.

While the discursive regimes of any selection process put linguistic demands on all candidates, access to these regimes is differentially distributed. These regimes can serve to reproduce inequalities of class as well as linguistic and ethnic inequality. Some research in selection interviewing and assessment has explored class inequality in selection at professional levels where ethnicity was either irrelevant or not attended to (Silverman and Jones 1975, Adlesward 1988, Komter 1991, Scheuer 2001) and has shown that, at professional levels, the interview/assessment can disadvantage on the

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<sup>2</sup> It is common place for low-paid routine work to involve lengthy interviews. In our data, interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes.

grounds of social class. However, ethnic minority and migrant candidates fare even less well than their white British counterparts in applying for professional level jobs (Auer and Kern 2000, Roberts, Campbell and Robinson 2008). In addition, research on interviews for low-paid, routine jobs and low-level vocational training shows that migrants experience inequalities even at this 'entry level' where no qualifications are required (Gumperz 1992, Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992, Sarangi 1994, Roberts and Campbell 2006), and suggest that the job interview is a key site of linguistic gatekeeping and produces for candidates from certain migrant groups a *linguistic penalty*.

### Linguistic penalty

The idea of a *linguistic penalty* focuses on the role of language in producing inequality in employment. It is drawn from two different sources. The first is a concept from the sociology of ethnic relations, the 'ethnic penalty' (Heath and Cheung 2006). The 'ethnic penalty' is a term used to describe the processes in the labour market which lead to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) job-seekers being less likely than their white counterparts to gain employment. The second draws on notions of the capitalisation of language and the valuing and (re)production of certain types of symbolic, and specifically linguistic, capital (Bourdieu 1991).

A 'linguistic penalty' is a combination of all the sources of disadvantage that might lead a linguistic minority group to fare less well in the selection/evaluation process generally and specifically in the labour market. This penalty derives from both the largely hidden demands on candidates to talk in institutionally credible ways, drawing on taken for granted socio-cultural resources on how to perform the institutional self (Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 2002) and from any other disadvantage related to linguistic minority status. In the case of the job interview, the erasure or, if it is mentioned, the recognition, presentation and receipt of foreign work experience (FWE) is one area where this penalty is produced. Those who experience a linguistic penalty are doubly disadvantaged, since their minority ethnic social identity, embodied in their FWE, may already

penalise them, and the language-mediated gate-keeping interview adds to this penalty.

### Competency frameworks

Competence-based selection developed as a response to social change brought about by globalisation and the new capitalism (Wood and Payne 1998). It is perceived as something of a silver bullet, solving the problems of how to select the flexible, self-managing candidate and also provide equality of opportunity in an increasingly diverse labour market. A competency framework, it is argued, selects for broad capabilities that can be tuned to changing situations and also provides a strong element of structure and regulation to meet equality requirements (Kandola 1996). No tension is seen between the standardisation and consistency required of equal opportunities legislation and bureaucracy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the impact of the neo-liberal ideology of the new capitalism and the requirements of the dynamic, flexible 'enterprising self' (du Gay 2000).

### Competency and diversity discourses

The recent discourses of diversity contribute to, in Bourdieu's term, the misrecognition of any tension or conflict between standardisation and equality in ethnically stratified societies. Discourses of equal opportunities and affirmative action of the 80s and 90s have shifted to discourses of 'diversity'. These new discourses are about judging everyone as individuals on the basis of their competencies within a new discourse of unity, and the 'common culture' of an organisation (Gagnon and Cornelius 2000, Zane 2002).<sup>3</sup> Diversity discourses no longer speak of discrimination but of individual competence, which includes, unsurprisingly, fitting into the cultural categories of the ideal employee. So, whatever your background, if you present yourself as a culturally appropriate team-worker and your experiences are invoked in linguistically accept-

<sup>3</sup> The notion of a shared or common culture clearly resonates with wider societal discourses of cultural nationalism (Gilroy 1993) and linguistic nationalism (Bilgic 1995), in which a common culture and language are seen as the cohesive elements of the nation-state.

able ways, then you are likely to be successful at selection. The fact that these judgements are determined by the taken for granted linguistic and cultural norms of institutional life is hidden by the very discourses that realise them. Asking each candidate the same competency questions gives a veneer of standardisation and thus fairness, but making the appropriate inferences about these questions assumes shared conditions for negotiating understanding (Gumperz 1982a). Diversity and competency discourses thus blend into a single discursive regime that further reinforces the competence-based interview (Scheepers 2007).<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the earlier period, where equal opportunity concerns could challenge institutional conventions, diversity discourses support them. While the rhetoric of variety and difference remains, in the actual practices of the job interview it is routinely suppressed, as the role of FWE shows.

### Competencies and the new capitalism

The 'new managerialism' and 'fast capitalism' of the global market (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996) requires companies to be ready to change product lines over night and this in turn has an effect on how people are managed. Traditional, hierarchical management has given way to a more flexible structure in which workers are expected to be more self-managing and no longer wait for decisions from a long command chain. As new responsibilities are pushed down to workers and hierarchies are flattened, shop-floor staff are expected to understand more of the organisation's goals and strategies. Workers are expected to develop an 'entrepreneurial self' (du Gay 2000), responsible, self-aware and self-managing. So, although 'personality' is rarely mentioned in the discourses of competency, the ideology of the new capitalism focuses on per-

sonality and character (Grugulis and Vincent 2009) and the importance of individuals buying into the core organisational values in the 'enterprise' culture (du Gay 2000).

Typical competences at all levels of jobs are: teamwork, the ability to self-manage and self-organise, flexibility, and the ability to cope with change. These in turn are derived from competence clusters such as 'drive', 'reasoning' and 'interpersonal' qualities and are set out in human resources policy statements and guidelines. In promotion and junior management selection interviews, these competences are re-worked to give explicit focus to managing people and tasks in teams, innovation and self-development, and learning from experience, particularly from failures. Frequently, competences are presented in verb/object phrase form in some habitual, open space, particularly, as in: 'juggles priorities', 'takes ownership', 'manages change', 'inspires people', 'drives results', 'seeks improvement', 'focuses action'. Implied in these abstract formulations are notions of agency, trustworthiness, communicative ability and the value of reflection, and laminated over all of them a sense of the 'entrepreneurial self'. In other words, these competences stretch far beyond any narrowly defined set of skills or abilities, to engage with the identity of the ideal candidate as a particular type of person within the organisation (Roberts 2011). These widely used competences are made up of the so-called soft skills (Urcioli 2008) rather than particular manual, craft or technical skills that were the basis for selection for low-paid and technical jobs until the latter part of the twentieth century (Grugulis and Vincent 2009, Payne 2000).

These under-defined and yet elastic competences can only be realised in relatively abstract terms that place a heavy inferential load on candidates. Only intense participation in this abstract semiotic world of constructed objectivity can make it accessible (Iedema 2003), and for many candidates such participation is not available. In some competence-based interviews, these competency phrases are explicitly referred to (see examples 4, 5, 11, 12), while in others they are only implied. However, because they are rela-

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<sup>4</sup> Scheepers in her study of Belgian discourses of diversity quotes from a Flemish action plan: 'the at first sight heterogeneous composition of the personnel (men, women, emigrants, older workers, starters, disabled people,...) will become one homogeneous unity because we all work for one goal. The organization has to be characterized by one common culture, in which there is room for valuing differences.'

tively open categories, even their more explicit use still requires some of the special inferences of the job interview and its associated social and cultural knowledge.

### Narratives and blended discourses

There is a further routine component, associated with the competency framework of these interviews, that creates a linguistic penalty for candidates from migrant backgrounds. This is the requirement to produce narrative answers to competency, and other more analytically framed questions. While the competency framework is relatively abstract, requiring candidates to infer what the interviewer is looking for, the narratives are expected to be structured in prototypical anglo ways (Labov and Waletzky 1967). The STAR structure widely used in North American and British job interviews: Situation, Task, Action and Result, assumes that candidates will give particular examples of their work experience relevant to the competence-framed question and

based on stories structured in this way. Indeed, some organisations use the STAR structure to fit such stories into the boxes on the interview forms (Roberts and Cambell 2005). These forms are designed with a box for each element of the STAR structure so that interviewers can fill them in as the story unfolds. In our research, while most white and British minority ethnic candidates produced acceptably structured stories, candidates from migrant backgrounds were less likely to tell stories or to structure them according to the STAR formula. This led to empty boxes on the interviewers' forms or negative comments since, in institutional terms, the story appeared unstructured. Within this structure, candidates are expected to produce what the social psychologist Micheal Bamberg calls a *storied self* (Bamberg 1997). This self is a particular take on the speaker that emerges through the details of the story. For example, one candidate, Trenton (also see examples 11 and 12) describes how he reacted when a customer lost her purse:

#### Example 2

- 1 C: e:r (1) a customer lost their (.) purse (.) in the actual club you know  
 2 obviously they had to fill out a crime reports  
 3 and obviously I I came forward (.) to help them do that  
 4 otherwise I would have stayed behind a little bit after work  
 5 wait for the police to arrive and everything (.)

This storied self is presented, as the story unfolds, as responsible, helpful, and with initiative. Trenton only stands outside the story as a narrator of it when they reach the 'R', the result or evaluation stage:

- 24: so I just took it upon my own initiative (.)  
 25: you know to just do as much as I could ((8 seconds of interviewer writing))

While candidates are expected to reveal themselves through detailed and vivid stories, the 'R' element is crucial in showing how they can analyse and evaluate themselves in institutionally appropriate ways to show that they are self-reflexive and can use this to be entrepreneurial. In job interview training, it is also common to train interviewers to 'drill down' further by asking more evaluative questions about candidates' thoughts and reactions. In other words, candi-

dates have to blend elements of the more personal modes of talk in the action of the story with more analytic or institutional ones. This more institutional discourse is characterised by abstract formulations (Iedema 2003), such as the competency categorisations described above, by discretion, balance and euphemisation (Bourdieu 1991), and the more analytic framing of talk, as Trenton does at line 24.

The STAR structure is constructed for candidates to show their competence first through stories and only then make more general claims after their experience has spoken for itself. Bold, unmitigated claims about your ability, e.g. 'I am not frightened of anything' (in example 1), in the early stages of an answer are routinely sanctioned on two counts: First, they replace the vivid showing of the self, and second, they are not sufficiently euphemised. Similarly, deontic modes of talking, e.g. 'You should be always alert', which are more frequent among candidates born abroad than other groups, are not well enough anchored in individual experience and appear too distancing. Indeed, any presentation of the self that does not align with both the organisation's vision of the entrepreneurial, self-reflexive individual and with the grounded, modest self who shows but does not show off, can fuel a negative evaluation, even for the type of low-paid, routine jobs discussed here.

So, the standardised competency framework calls for and calls up a blending of institutional and personal discourses in a managed form of familiarity that we might call, as something of an oxymoron, *bureaucratic intimacy*. The tightly scripted design of the late twentieth century equal opportunities interview has given way to a hybrid of regulation and improvisation in which institutional and personal discourses are interwoven (Campbell and Roberts 2007). The distancing of institutional discourses is held in check by the familiarisation of the candidate through 'experientially grounded' (Edwards 1991) stories and the interviewers' engrossment in them. As Edwards suggests in his discussion of the Watergate accounts, detailed and lively accounts are perceived as convincing and are rapidly transformed into judgements of trustworthiness (also see Kerekes 2003 on trust in the job interview). In turn, these stories are distanced from their telling and made 'bureaucratically processible' (Iedema 2003) by more institutional modes of talk that are more abstract, analytic and euphemised.

Competences are routinely assessed through narratives of past experience, on the assumption that what candidates say they have done and how they reflect on this past experience is more

useful and fairer than asking hypothetical questions (Huffcutt and Roth 1998). These narratives of previous work experience provide the core evidence on which assessments are formally made. In most cases, for candidates born abroad, this means foreign work experience.

### **Foreign Work Experience (FWE)**

FWE is problematic in the British job interview in three different ways: the fact of its unfamiliarity and assumed lack of fit, the central role of stories of past experience in the interview, and the additional linguistic capital required to deal with both of these within the discursive regimes of the job interview. Firstly, FWE may be erased all together, dismissed early on or, in organisations where equality issues in selection are taken seriously, be accepted but require protracted sequences to make the strange familiar. By contrast, candidates born and educated in the UK bring experience that is imaginable by the interviewers, who collaborate with candidates in producing this shared world, as is discussed below.

Secondly, in our data, candidates spend more time telling stories of past experience elicited from competence questions than on any other sub-genre of the selection interview. The occupational psychology research, although not entirely consistent, suggests that so-called 'behavioural' questions (about past experience) are fairer than 'situational' ones (that ask about hypothetical cases) (Huffcutt and Roth 1998). Most competence-designed interviews, therefore, elicit past experience answers in the form of stories (see narrative structure above). The widespread use of such a structure suggests that organisations assume that it is institutionally acceptable. And most of the discourse-based studies of job interviews do not focus on the elicitation of past work experience as being inherently problematic, but rather on its display and receipt.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> An exception is Scheuer's suggestive study that subtle class-based differences related to relative success in interviews for managerial and professional posts stem from different topoi about how work is experienced: the extent to which candidates identify themselves and their sense of fulfilment through work or not (Scheuer 2001).

Thirdly, for candidates whose work experience has been wholly or substantially overseas, translating global experience into institutional models of competency requires additional linguistic capital to manage the discursive regimes of the interview, where FWE has to be explained and defended and where its display can produce new interactional difficulties. With the exception of Auer and his colleagues (Auer 1998, Auer and Kern 2000, Birkner and Kern 2000, Birkner 2004), discussed below, there has been little attention paid to the role of foreign work experience, the gap in socio-cultural knowledge between interviewer and candidate in negotiating its acceptance, and how this interacts with other linguistic penalties. Drawing on Hinnenkamp (1987:144) the problematics of FWE are both *brought into* the interview and *brought about* in it.

#### **FWE brought into the interview and its potential for dismissal**

Both candidates and interviewers bring to the interview experiences and stances that make FWE problematic. Most of the candidates in our data who were born abroad, both from the EU and elsewhere, brought to the interview qualifications and experience incommensurate with the job. Only two of the 19 had any substantial work experience in the UK and all of them came from professional backgrounds and/or had higher education, often to MA level. For this group of candidates, their insertion into the labour market has led to a loss of symbolic capital in terms of unrecognised qualifications and work experience that has no easy fit with the job on offer (GLA 2005). Fitting into available job slots leads to deprofessionalisation and decapitalisation. Unlike other groups of migrants such as elite cosmopolitan groups (Block 2007) or bilingual professionals (Day and Wagner 2007), this group were not only applying for routine, low-paid jobs for which they were overqualified, but were also much less likely to be offered them. However, and this is a further disadvantage, they were similar to other non-elite migrant groups in that the embodied competences of flexibility, self-management, and managing change (evidenced by the experience of migration itself) are trumped

in the job interview by the linguistic competence to talk about such capabilities in institutionally acceptable ways.

FWE is presented as interactionally problematic by candidates through hesitation and other markers of doubt, with comments that frame the experience as possibly inappropriate (e.g. 'but that was a bit different') or explicit checks with interviewers that they are allowed to include it. This suggests that it is brought into the interview by candidates as already tagged of questionable validity within the discursive regimes of the institution.

There is also plenty of evidence that interviewers also treat FWE as problematic. It may not be referred to at all either in interviewer forms or training and its mention is treated differently by different interviewers, accepted by some (examples 4 and 5) and dismissed by others (examples 1 and 3). Where no space is made in the interview for FWE to be included at all, some candidates insert it without mitigation, where they can, even if its sequential location at that point in the interview structure is problematic, as in this next example.

Jaswinder has applied for an upgrade from his present job in a food processing company which would involve moving from food preparation to a cooking job in the kitchen. Towards the end of the interview during which no reference has been made to any FWE, the question of tests is raised. At this point, the elicitation of the past experience phase is clearly over and so Jaswinder's insertion is not taken up and only minimally responded to for both structural reasons (the wrong time to give this information) and for substantive reasons (the experience is responded to as irrelevant).

At line 8, Jaswinder interrupts the interviewer, latching onto what he may anticipate is a negative outcome, that he may not pass, to interpolate new information: He was a maths teacher in India. The interviewer's apparent positive evaluation at line 11 is minimal and is rapidly followed by a reformulation of her turn at line 5 and by a twice repeated assertion that 'everybody' will take the test. The new candidate information is now treated as irrelevant, since

## Example 3

1. I: I also need to tell you that all A (.)
2. this is an A grade job okay
3. with A grade jobs now
4. everybody will be put forward for a (.) for a literacy and a numeracy test
5. so English and maths test
6. J: yeah
7. I: okay if you shouldnt shouldnt =
8. J: = I was a mathematician in the India [maths master
9. I: oh was you]
10. J: yeah=
11. I: = okay good (.) good
12. so everybody will be put forward for this test
13. if you if you dont pass this test
14. then unfortunately we wont be able to offer you the job [okay
15. J: [alright
16. I: but but everybody will go through the same test
17. J: alright
18. I: er:m and that is the next stage of the interview stage [so
19. J: alright]
20. I: if you get through this stage
21. well then put you forward for your English and Maths test (.)
22. if thats okay then well well call you back

whatever his experience and competence, he will be treated the same as all other candidates. There is no extended token of acknowledgement of Jaswinder's experience as a teacher, nor any comment during the interview or in the wash-up session afterwards that he might have skills more relevant to office work than cooking sauces.

### **FWE brought about in the interview**

The struggles around FWE are not only brought into the interview but are brought about in it. The talk becomes problematic since FWE requires more negotiation if it is to be accepted. Candidates born in the UK can use their work experience to claim some solidarity and familiarity with interviewers, but FWE distances candidates from interviewers as they try to fit their stories into boxes (Roberts and Campbell 2005). This affects the relative intimacy or mutuality of the encounter as it becomes interactionally asynchronous (Erickson and Shultz 1982) and less bureaucratically processible (Iedema 2003). Candidates face two specific problems: the contextual bur-

den and the equivalences burden. Managing this additional load requires candidates to work harder with less linguistic capital and in doing so the narrative structure can be disrupted (see example 5 lines 15- 16).

In their studies of East and West German styles of interviewing, Auer, Kern and Birkner discuss the work of making FWE relevant and the highlighting of socio-cultural differences in the different discursive regimes of East and West selection interviews and the presentation of self within them. The 19 candidates in our research who were born abroad are from 15 different countries, so it is not possible to talk about contrastive communicative styles nor to assume that interviewers are familiar with the 'foreignness' of candidates' FWE as they were in the German studies. Rather, we look for a blend of plausible explanations based on differences and difficulties with linguistic resources, communicative styles, asymmetries of knowledge and socio-political differences, as the examples below illustrate. These can be usefully divided into the contextual burden and the equivalences burden.

### The contextual burden

While candidates may have to design carefully how they introduce FWE (through explicit comments and requests as described above), the hard interactional work to connect it to the competences required in a convincing way has only just begun. Considerably more contextual explanation is required to make the fit. The more different the experiences and resources of institutional interviewer and interviewee, the more discursive effort is required of the latter, as studies of asylum seeker stories in eligibility determination interviews have shown in an acute form (Maryns 2006). The candidates' task is to contextualise their individual stories well enough for interviewers to make appropriate inferences for

purposes of evaluation and selection. The problem for the candidate lies in knowledge asymmetries – what does the interviewer need to know? – and in the time and structural constraints of the interview.<sup>6</sup>

In example four, Renard, a Polish sports teacher who has also worked in a distance learning organisation, is applying for a job in a delivery company. The interviewer introduces the second of five competences to be covered in the interview.

<sup>6</sup> In our data, successful candidates talked between 50-70% of the time, mostly at the lower end. Candidates from migrant backgrounds averaged 74% , suggesting that they had to spend more time contextualising their FWE.

#### Example 4

1. I: okay (.) the second one is satisfying customers
2. u::rm again in any business
3. customers is the most important thing (.) yeah
4. R: yeah
5. I: so (name of delivery company) is not any different (.)
6. we are (.) also trying our best
7. to sort of always satisfying the customers um (.)
8. so under this heading
9. what I am looking for is a instance- specific instance
10. where you have gone out of your way to um help a customer
11. or (.) a- solve a customers problem or something like that
12. R: yep (.) err I was err- like I wrote in my application form
13. I was err sales representative (.) err I was selling err books for err
14. children (.) preparing for err exams to A-level
15. I: mmhm
16. R: and err (.) I err had to contact err face-to-face with customer and err
17. we err was a lot of customers very demanding (.) and err (.) firstly I
18. always listened them (.) what they have to err say what they want
19. what err they err what they err looking for (.)
20. er which price range (.) which book (.)
21. and err after I was err explain them
22. what er we've got what er we offer them (.)
23. what for example book is the best for the- for the children or
24. err (.) mm:m for the price=
25. I: =yeah=
26. R: =what they can offer me (.) and err (2)
27. I: yeah
28. R: if they for example needed something else what I didnt have
29. I said always e::rr(.) I err mm:m (8) err I always err (.) like err said to them err I give them my name
30. my telephone number and I say (.)
31. I- if find something I call you and I- I- I give you this err
32. if w-we have for example in the future (.)
33. I give you- I will (.) come back to you

## Example 4

This is the beginning of a protracted sequence of nearly three minutes in which Renard explains the procedures used in trying to sell school textbooks. As in Auer's and his associates' research, there is some explicit knowledge compensation in Renard's translation of the Polish exam system into the English school systems (at line 14 'A level') and also considerably more context setting than in the narratives of British born candi-

dates. Renard describes the procedures in selling the textbooks and his habitual activities but has not selected a specific example. In terms of the narrative STAR structure, he has given the situation and the general task but has not reached the A for action stage.

After the interviewer has probed about how customers react, he asks if what Rafael has described is normal policy in this company:

## Example 5

1. I: right (.) the- the company you were
2. working for Distill (.) Distentil
3. R: Distance Learning
4. I: Distance Lear- Learning Limited (.) do they normally sort of
5. as- as a policy tells everyone urm (.)
6. if (.) the (.) programme is not available
7. leave the (.) message with um (.)
8. R: a]
9. I: an]d contact them later (.) o r=
10. R: = err they can but urm it is not always (.)
11. sometimes it is for example
12. new products this coming (.) something very similar [what they
13. I: ok]
14. R: want and its err I can ring them and err explain them
15. er::rr its err (.) .hhh similar book or something like that
16. I: (.) okay (.) no what I am trying to err [find out
17. R: err right] (.) [sorry
18. I: here is](.)
19. no no no thats alright
20. R: ((laughs))
21. I: whether it is like (.)
22. company policy to urm follow [that procedure
23. R: yeah yes] yes [yes
24. I: or] whether-
25. whether you are taking u::rm err decisions
26. on your own to help a customer
27. R: err no it is like this err errr company (.) it's like err (.)
28. this company working with e::rr m:mm (0.1)
29. ministr- (.) ministry of education in [Poland
30. I: right ok] yeah yeah
31. R: and is together and there is like for help for child[ren
32. I: okay]
33. R: to get better err lots of err (0.1) err treats [and
34. I: ok]
35. R: get better in-
34. I: so
35. R: in education
36. I: so all the sales (.) err reps (.) um who go out ummm (.) selling
37. these err books or (.) programmes [yes
38. R: yes]

39. I: so will they be all doing the same as (.) as what as what you do  
 40. R: err (.) yeah  
 41. I: [if  
 42. R: [yes  
 43. I: if] the programme is not available they'll take the contact (.)  
 44. R: yes  
 45. I: err [details of  
 46. R: yes yes]  
 47. I: the [person  
 48. R: [yes [yes  
 49. I: and] then come and phone  
 50. R: yes  
 51. I: okay(0.3) right (.0.2) the ne:xt one in there is managing yourself

At lines 16-18, the interviewer tries to shift the customer focus topic onto a different gear, by setting up a contrast between routine company policy and the possibility (unspoken because Renard intervenes) that sales representatives can take their own initiative; in terms of the STAR narrative structure, get to the A for action. This is an attempt to steer Renard back to the crucial element in the opening turn of the competency question (lines 9-10 in example 4) where he is asked for a specific instance when he has 'gone out of his way to help a customer'. The conundrum for both interviewer and candidate is that the company is controlled by the state and the ministry of education lays down the procedures that have to be followed so that Renard cannot stand out as behaving exceptionally well, as this would not be following official policy (Kulesza 2002). Again this has echoes in the German research where East German candidates orientate to and try to compensate for the relative lack of individual decision-making in the former communist Eastern block. A further problem is that Renard gives no evidence in his replies that he has picked up the cues in the opening question. These cues are designed to call up a local context and set of inferences (Gumperz 1982a; 1982b; 1996) that should channel his response into a story about how he showed individual agency and commitment in relation to a particular customer – in other words the *Action* of the story. At line 16, the interviewer halts Renard's continued outline of the task to clarify the insti-

tutional intention behind his previous questions, but by line 51, he gives up. The allotted time on each competence (about 5 minutes) has been used up but Renard cannot be marked on his A and R on the STAR structure, and, because of the constraints of the job in Poland, has not been able to display his agency or initiative.

The comments from the interviewer when giving feedback from the interview support this analysis:

#### Example 6

'In customer service, Renard generalises a lot – he doesn't use the personal pronoun enough, and while he explains the reasons why customers might be upset he doesn't explain what *he* would do about this. I feel that Renard is repeatedly missing the point as he explains about the book company he was working for and their policies, but doesn't realise that I am trying to look at how he has gone *beyond* this.'

A similar pattern also occurred with a candidate from South Kerala, attempting to explain his experience of teamwork based on his job with a national literacy project in this south Indian communist-run state. Again, the interviewer never 'drills down' to the Action and Result after five minutes of Situation and Task.

These difficulties cannot be readily explained by an ethnicised notion of cultural clash. Rather, the negative evaluation of both candidates stems from several factors. First, there are the socio-political discourses and work practices of

states where such competences as ‘team playing’ or ‘customer satisfaction’ have no or different resonances. In these two instances, Poland and Kerala, and in the German studies discussed above, the ideological values of communism structure work and workers’ relationship to it in contrast to western discourses of individualism. Second, the structuring of accounts and stories with considerable context setting begins to disrupt the institutional narrative structure and prevents its completion. Renard is interrupted at lines 15-16 in example 5 to pull him back to the specific example required where the *Action* (the A of the STAR structure) can be evaluated. And so much time is spent on context setting and clarifying the environment where ‘customers could be satisfied’ that the action and then crucially the R, result and reflection on the experience, are not elicited. This is a type of collusion between interviewers asking for more detailed accounts to produce something experientially grounded and relevant, and candidates anxious to sell their stories, compensate for interviewers’ lack of knowledge, and comply with the requests for details. Lastly, as shown in Interactional Sociolinguistic studies of Chinese and Indian speakers of English and on the German studies discussed above, the structuring of candidate responses may be drawing on communicative styles that elaborate on the con-

text before coming to what in western discourses would be perceived as the main or most relevant point (Young 1994, Gumperz 1996, Auer 1998).

### Equivalence burden

Candidates who are aware that they have to make their experience familiar and thereby relevant will attempt, like Renard in example 4 line 14, to translate specific terms used in their FWE into UK equivalences. However, where whole categories of work have no institutional equivalence in the UK, the burden of aligning two such different systems adds to the linguistic penalty since the candidate has to produce an extended comparative explanation. Luis was a type of civil engineer in the Philippines whose job was a combination of engineer, surveyor, draughtsman and tax inspector in the land tax department of the national government. He was also applying for a low-paid job in the same large delivery company as Renard. In this next example, Luis is asked for an example in which he had to deal with a difficult customer. He opts to take his example from his work in the land tax department and begins by contextualising the scope of his work. He then gives an example of an angry woman who considered she had been overtaxed and outlines how he will deal with her anger by explaining the tax system and possible method of payment:

#### Example 7

1. L: e:r I give him some-some computation and some- some checklist of her
2. land tax that's it so you're going to- I-I explain him briefly so h- erm so you
3. going to to know it how
4. I: okay
5. L: i:n a- easy in stage by stage payment yeah [thats it
6. I: okay] right (.)
7. okay Im going to ask you the next question
8. which is managing yourself

After spending four and half minutes on the customer satisfaction question, the interviewer shifts at line 7 to the next question and although Luis has reached the Action stage of the STAR structure, there is no time to press him on the outcomes of the action, the crucial Result element in which candidates’ institutional dis-

courses are brought in to show their more analytic, self-reflexive qualities.

The problem for Luis is that his professional work was complex, cut across normative British categories of professional work, and involved him in conflicts of a different order from the imagined irate customer of the competency

question. Since these are low-paid jobs, interviewers expect the irate customer question to elicit relatively straightforward examples of dissatisfied customers in routine service encounters which would reflect experience of the kind of low-paid work that organisations recruiting for low-paid work expect candidates to have. A similar equivalence burden is faced by many migrant candidates from professional backgrounds. Both the categories of their work are often different but also, as professionals, they conceptualise their jobs in terms of general processes and talk about them in the more abstract register of institutional discourses when the question was asking for a specific example, as was the case with Renard (see above). A limited question: 'I want an example where you have worked as part of a team to achieve something' has no easy equivalence in his work of planning and managing the curriculum.

The upshot from such interviews is to disrupt the expected narrative structure, leaving empty boxes on the form, to penalise candidates whose work experience cannot be easily realised as evidence of the competences required, and to raise more general questions about candidates' communicative skills on two counts. First, their ability to make appropriate inferences about the question and the additional linguistic labour

needed to contextualise and find equivalences requires more complex communication than that expected of other candidates. Second, this linguistic labour highlights communicative competence, which is likely to be the most challenging competence for those from migrant backgrounds with little or no experience of the British job interview and its requirements to align with the cultural categories of the ideal employee.

### **FWE penalties and linguistic penalties**

The next example, a revisiting of example 1, has elements of the problematics of FWE described above but also shows where even a fluent speaker of English presents himself in ways that, in Blommaert's (2005) words, do not 'travel well'. Suhil has told the two interviewers about being a ward clerk for two years in India, where he describes the records system he worked with, a one-year post handling students in a college in London, and a temporary job in the same hospital as the job he is now applying to. He is then asked if he prefers working behind the scenes to front-line jobs. While interviews for this post are not designed around explicitly stated competencies, the implied concept here is that of working face to face with the public and so of customer relations and satisfaction.

#### **Example 8**

29. I: If you werent successful would you (.) um (.)  
 30. like to be considered for .h a\_position behind the scenes  
 31. S: well [f-  
 32. I: or ] are you [specifically  
 33. S: for me] its not [very important  
 34. I: patient ok]  
 35. S: whether Im working behind the scene or in front of the scene hh  
 36. actually speaking because I worked as a ward clerk  
 37. Ive handled the reception  
 38. Ive got two years working=  
 39. I: =Yeah I [understand that  
 40. S: experience also] so Im not afraid of anything  
 41. I: But that's obviously [in India  
 42. S: right]  
 43. I: not here ((laughs loudly))  
 44. S: ((nods)) thats in India yeah  
 45. All: (laughter)  
 46. S: But patients are patients

47. I: ((Clears throat loudly)) ((looks at interviewer 2 still laughing)) [debatable  
 48. I2: well ( )]  
 49. S: I'm not here to debate because you are more experienced  
 50. I: Yeah  
 51. S: So I dont because (.) obviously I mean I-I'm here to give my best=  
 52. I2: =mhmm=  
 53. I: =[yeah I appreciate that  
 54. S: and I'm here to convince you] if I if Im able to convince you  
 55. Im\_fortunate if Im (.) I cannot convince you I'm [unfortunate  
 56. I: Yeah]=  
 57. I2: =mhmm=

It is not clear from the opening question whether the interviewer is pressing Suhil on whether he is more of a backstage than frontstage person or whether the interview is setting up the possibility of Suhil being considered for other jobs. His subsequent turns at lines 33-40 shift the rhetorical grounds of this phase of the interview from grounded stories of competence to what Goffman calls podium talk (Goffman 1981: 137-140), an appropriate dramaturgical footing for the subject of front and backstage, but not one that fits with either the narrative structures and display of self through example, or the euphemised institutional discourse that regulates the job interview. This shift happens gradually until lines 49-54 when Suhil's rhetoric, 'I'm not here to debate... I'm here to convince you', elicits only minimal responses from the interviewers.

The shift occurs between lines 33 and 39 with Suhil's initial formulation and the main interviewer's closing receipt of this information at line 39. Yet, at line 36, Suhil introduces new information about the ward clerk job in India, the fact that he worked in reception. The main interviewer attempts, at line 39, to close down what may be seen as repetition (the fact that he worked for two years as a ward clerk), rather than what it is, an expansion that gives evidence of his front-line experience. Suhil re-captures the floor with an extreme claim: 'so I'm not afraid of anything'. In the interviewer's next turn, at line 41, the FWE is dismissed with laughter, which Suhil attempts to cap with a gnomic saying, at line 46, 'But patients are patients', shifting his stance from the expected storied self with telling

examples, to an aphoristic self, instructing the interviewers on the nature of patients in general. The main interviewer, at line 47, responds with several paralinguistic cues, a shift in gaze and the comment 'debatable', designed to encourage the second interviewer to collude in her rejection of Suhil's attempt to make his FWE skills transferrable. At this point, the rhetorical shift moves Suhil into a general bid to convince the panel of his worth, presenting the 'I' as a commentator on the interview process rather than a contributor to it. In narrative analysis terms, Suhil has shifted the focus from the storied or narrated self to the narrating self (Bamberg 1997, Georgakopoulou 2003), so that neither personal and grounded accounts nor euphemised, analytic talk are produced. The negotiation of FWE has drawn Suhil into a discursive space that is negatively valued.

In the wash-up session afterwards, the interviewers judged him as not telling them enough about his skills and experience and, crucially, not showing how these could be transferred to a London setting. In the interview itself, he was interrupted when he tried to do just this and the rhetorical shift to explicit self-commentary, 'so I'm not here to debate', and his subsequent pronouncements, may have fed into the evaluation of the lack of grounded, transferable skills. Instead of talking about what he had learnt from his experience and its relevance for the current post and evaluating his skills in a grounded way, he spends time evaluating his presence at and the purpose of the interview. While 'But patients are patients' is Suhil's attempt to show that his



## Example 10

1. C: there was a lot of other coaches involved there
2. I think there was like something like about eight of us (.)
3. eight or nine of us (.) e:r down there in (name) Park
4. right next door to the stadium
5. matter of fact we (2) and that
6. was with local kids from the community
7. I: okay (yeah yeah) ((9 seconds writing))
8. so how does the system work then (.)
9. do the er:m schools contact you guys
10. and say can you come and do some (.) e:[r sessions
11. C: mmm sometimes] er sometimes
12. we obviously promote ourselves to s- er
13. certain schools in the borough s- er
14. even out of the borough
15. like I do jobs in (name of borough) and like you [know
16. I: okay]
17. C: m like I travel around for them like
18. so (.) sometimes the schools
19. approach us sometimes we approach them

At line 8, the interviewer guides Trenton to talk in a somewhat more institutional mode of talk when he asks about the system, but then imagines how it works in answering his own question (lines 9-10). So Trenton has to do less interactional work and is also cued to talk in terms of general procedures (lines 12-13) and not just

give the convincing, but not sufficiently institutional, description in lines 1-6.

As in Renard's interview, the second competence question is about customer satisfaction. And like Renard, Trenton is cued to give a specific example when he 'went out of his way'. His first story is drawn from when he worked on the door of a nightclub:

## Example 11

- 6 C: e:r (1) a customer lost their (.) purse (.) in the actual club you know
- 7 obviously they had to fill out a crime reports
- 8 and obviously I I came forward (.) to help them do that
- 9 otherwise I would have stayed behind a little bit after work
- 10 wait for the police to arrive and everything (.)
- 11 say that they was in the club (.)
- 12 did have money (.) they were spending money
- 13 they was they not just trying to (.) you know (.)
- 14 pull a fast one there
- 15 I: so en- do you have to have like a (.)
- 16 do you have a set procedure that you follow
- 17 if someone come comes and says [ (that erm)
- 18 C: there wasnt] actually
- 19 a set procedure for lost property
- 20 I: okay [(so you just fill in the report )
20. C: er in a in a pl- yeah it was] its a nightclub
21. I was just doing door work there=
22. I: =mm okay=
23. C: = because I actually I knew the manager (.) at the time
24. I: okay

25. C: er:m (.) so er (and that) there wasnt a set procedure for lost property  
 26. there wasnt like a lost property room or anything like that  
 27. so I just took it upon my own initiative (.)  
 28. you know to just do as much as I could ((8 seconds of interviewer writing))  
 29. I: okay so I ill take it that thatll be a s- (.) a section or some-  
 30. or whatever it is there er:m  
 31. if someone finds er:m a handbag they will hand it over=  
 32. C: = oh yeah yeah=  
 33. I: = right okay then  
 34. C: definitely=

Trenton picks up the special inferences in the interviewer's question both at line 8 and lines 27-28. He first positions himself, in practice and metaphorically, as the one who stood out, 'obviously I came forward'. Then when the interviewer asks about set procedures, he interprets this question as less about the company's policy and more about how he went out of his way,

'I just took it upon my own initiative'. This collaborative phase is enhanced by the interviewer's imagining what happens to lost property at lines 20 and 29 so that Trenton only has to agree with him.

The interviewer then asks him for a further example and Trenton returns to his football coach experience:

#### Example 12

1. I: I could give you another one for [when  
 2. I: (okay)]  
 3. C: I was (like) working for (name) Football Club er  
 4. imagine a (the) parents coming late  
 5. I: yeah  
 6. C: for instance and all the other coaches maybe have to do this (.)  
 7. maybe have to do that you know (.) maybe I'd wait behind for the  
 8. parents to come (.) you know maybe let the the pupil (.) phone home  
 9. or (.) phone (mum) if they know their mobile number (.)  
 10. Id just help as much as I could you know ((15 seconds writing))  
 11. C: problems with bullying you know I sorted that  
 12. I sorted out little problems like that you know  
 13. people are like obviously (.) one kid maybe targeting another kid  
 14. saying bad things and upsetting that [kid  
 15. I: (mm)]  
 16. C: that kids gone home home mom he's always upsetting me (.)  
 17. come to me obviously (.) you know [s- yeah  
 18. I: keep t-]  
 19. keeps an eye on (him and obviously)]  
 20. C: to smooth things out you know (.)  
 21. to be tactful in certain situations ((7 seconds writing))

At line 4, it is Trenton who draws the interviewer into his figured world, 'imagine parents coming late', and sets up two vivid connecting stories about how he supports the children if their parents are late or they experience bullying. This collaborative phase is sealed by the interviewer, at lines 18-19, showing his engrossment and understanding of the story not only with an imagined action, but also in echoing Trenton's stance, 'obviously'. The experience brought into the interview is immediately familiar and recognisable to the interviewer, so the STAR structure is displayed in full and, collaboratively, Trenton's competence in people-handling skills and his flexibility in dealing with situations as they arise are responded to and institutionally recorded.

### Conclusion

Local British candidates like Trenton can make the appropriate inferences, draw on experiences that are readily imaginable to the interviewer, and use their everyday story-telling resources to produce a bureaucratically processible response. By contrast, migrants and other groups educated and with work experience from overseas are penalised in multiple ways. The regulation and management of foreign work experience both provides an additional penalty and serves to reinforce other linguistic penalties brought about in the interview. Dealing with these penalties effectively distances the candidates from the interviewers and the organisational values they represent. They are constructed as the 'other' and more likely than other groups to be excluded from work opportunities.

The process of 'othering' drawn from critical social theory and anthropology and well summed up in Hallam and Street (2000) works in four different ways in the treatment of FWE: (i) the unfamiliarity with the discursive regimes of the British job interview, which value certain styles of presentation, such as the blending of institutional and personal modes of talk and the STAR narrative structure, and not others. (ii) the disruption of the conventional narrative structure to establish equivalences, understand the context, and negotiate the relevance. This means that candidates are less able to produce

vivid, coherent and compelling stories and their experiences are less likely to be bureaucratically processed; they have either told too little or too much. (iii) contextualising their experiences, by attempting to make the strange familiar, manage criticisms of their self-presentations, and negotiate the problems that their FWE has produced, requires harder interactional and linguistic labour from candidates with FWE than that demanded of British candidates with local work experience. (iv) the interactional distancing that stems from this disruption and this labour produces the social distancing that 'others' them and leads to a much higher exclusion rate than that experienced by British candidates.

Competency and diversity discourse and the practice of standardised and equal for all competence-based interviews demonstrate a public rhetoric of equality and fairness and institutions can, therefore, defend themselves as their processes are regulated, scrutinised and legitimated. Yet migrant groups, such as those discussed here, face inequalities based on the implicit linguistic demands and constraints of the interview and the valuing of certain styles of talk. While the language of competences is carefully regimented by institutions, the fact that candidates bring different resources to their interpretation is not attended to. The discursive regimes of the interview exclude those candidates who are not linguistically 'acceptable' (Jenkins 1986) and render invisible the linguistic penalties they face. The job selection interview for low-paid work is therefore a key setting where language masks the contradiction between apparent fairness and unequal outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1991; Duchene and Heller 2011). These discursive regimes require particular ways of talking and interacting while claiming a general fairness. This is one of three tensions, at different levels, that coalesce and are played out in the job interview. There is the tension between, first, standardisation and diversity, second, between regulation in line with equal opportunities and the entrepreneurial self, and third, between institutional distancing and propriety and between conversational involvement and familiarity. These tensions are

masked by the language of interviews. They illustrate the 'co-existence of oppositions' (Bourdieu 1998: 121) and how institutional discourses and language practices gloss over these oppositions and sequester away the inequalities that selection interviews produce. The analysis of such tensions contributes to our understanding of some of the processes of exclusion that migrants face despite the rhetorics of diversity and equal opportunity.

### Transcription conventions

Where there is more than one interviewer, the interviewers are labelled I1 and I2.

The report uses the transcription conventions shown below, which are adapted from Psathas 1995

[	<b>Beginning of overlap</b> e.g. T: I used to smoke[a lot B: he thinks he's real tough
]	<b>End of overlap</b> e.g. T: I used to smoke [a lot B: he th] inks he's real tough
=	<b>Latching</b> ie. Where the next speaker's turn follows on without any pause A: I used to smoke a lot= B: =He thinks he's real tough
(.)	<b>Untimed brief pauses</b>
(0.5)	<b>Timed pauses</b> approx. seconds & tenths of a second e.g. (0.5) / (0.1) / (2.0)
:	<b>Sounds stretch</b> e.g. I gue:ss you must be right
-	<b>Cut-off</b> prior word or sound e.g. 'I thou- well I thought
<u>Yes</u>	<b>Emphasis</b> i.e. Perceived stress indicated by volume and pitch change
(s'pose so/spoke to)	<b>Unclear talk / possible hearings</b> in the case of <b>multiple possibilities</b>
(xxxxxx)	<b>Unrecognisable talk</b> , words replaced by insertion marks to indicate length of talk
((child's name))	<b>Description of named person anonymised name</b> e.g. ((interviewer's name))
((laugh))	<b>Description of vocal sound that interrupts talk</b> e.g. ((cough))

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# From multilingual classification to translingual ontology: concluding commentary

By David PARKIN

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## Abstract

This paper presents extensive commentaries and reflections on most of the papers in this special issue (with the exception of Arnaut's contribution) as well as in the previous *Language and Superdiversities* special issue (*Diversities* 13/2). The papers of David Parkin and Karel Arnaut are both attempts to devise new frames of reference for the sociolinguistic study of super-diversity. Here Parkin argues that the use of semiotic resources does not unambiguously classify social strata and ethnic groups but creates and draws from communicative outlines that cut across them and blur their contours. This has two consequences. One is that contemporary polylinguaging is an ontological act on the part of speakers to empower themselves or to project a desired or appropriate personal image, perhaps in accordance with some kind of network membership but not tied to a domain or topic in the broader sense given above. The other is that this creation of identity is through semiotic stylisation, which by nonstandard means projects new identities or reinforces existing ones.

## Superdiversity and language

In addressing the issue of 'superdiversity' as defined by Vertovec (2007), these papers indirectly address an historical turning point. The late nineteen eighties and early nineteen nineties saw major geo-political changes coinciding with those of rapid communications technology and the maturing of the digital age. There was the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, which Ernest Gellner called the most momentous occasion since the French revolution; the ensuing collapse of communism; its conversion to a new kind of capitalism in China following that country's reforms of the 1980s; the remarkably swift effect of India's own economic reforms; and the ending of apartheid in South Africa. That these politico-economic events occurred within a few years of

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each other is a good illustration of the knock-on effects of crises in relation to each other. Not necessarily related, at least in the first instance, was the way in which an already slowly growing globalisation following the second world war was further helped through increasing use of mobile phones and the internet, a change that has since been accelerated at a pace and to a geographic extent that leaves us bewildered in the very moment of experiencing it. The so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011 is surely a precursor of more of the like to come, as are the burgeoning new patterns of international population movement, with new, smaller and more ethno-culturally diverse groups of migrants caulked upon earlier, long-standing migratory patterns. It is surely indisputable that national boundaries, for all the attempts of powerful nations to patrol them, are becoming more porous. They are part of a global demographic shift in the making, punctuated no

doubt by savage curbs but redefining ineluctably and irreversibly the very idea of a self-recognising population.

It is true that prior to the late nineteen eighties there was already a speed of communication and contact that made it feasible to speak of a new kind of globalisation different in these respects from any predecessors. But in this earlier globalisation politico-economic and socio-cultural diversity were seen as made up of supposedly discrete elements brought together in conjunction and not yet so merged as to lose their respective remembered lines of differentiation. The diversity then was really that of parallelisms and pluralities. Ethnic pluralism, cultural pluralism, medical pluralism and linguistic pluralism referred in liberal quarters to the side-by-side relations of distinctive entities or knowledges that were encouraged to celebrate their distinctiveness and, despite real differences between them of power, privilege and resources, to take their place as equals before each other. Ideologies cannot last for long without material or substantive reinforcement and, cross-cut by increasing inequalities, the ideal-based pluralisms gave way at their edges to fuzzy boundaries or no boundaries at all.

As I understand it, the concept of superdiversity tries to capture the implications of this alleged development from the co-existing, side-to-side (and sometimes back-to-back) relations of relatively bounded entities to the reverberative, criss-crossing and subdivision of different parts of these entities. In the field of linguistic ethnography, the latter is a process that Rampton (1995; 2010) has called crossover speech or crossing, in which a range of diverse linguistic particles are borrowed, transformed, returned and employed as communicative 'resources', to use the notion much evident in many papers of this and the previous special issue and which I examine below. The resources make up what Blommaert (2011) calls a speech 'repertoire' and which are deployed in what Jørgensen and others (2011) call 'polylinguaging' and Creese and Blackledge (2010) refer to as 'translinguaging'. The key position adopted by the group authoring these papers is that such processes are more

than just code-switching. To coin a phrase, everyday speech is becoming more and more a matter of constant polythetic classification with social impact, as speakers juggle the limits of face-to-face intelligibility at any one time with new styles of expression made up of ever changing linguistic resources. Varis and Xuan (2011) similarly talk of a struggle between semiotic creativity and normativity. As Rampton showed for urban Britain, ethnicity from the 1980s and 1990s began to lose its predominance as a driver of youth speech in favour of social class and the crossing of different speech 'styles', a class-based heteroglossic vernacular which seems to have lasted into some speakers' middle age and is not just a cyclical generational characteristic (Rampton 2006; 2011).

So what is the difference between this new theoretical position and, say, early 1960/1970s descriptions by Joshua Fishman (1966; 1971) of 'language shift, maintenance and stability' and the code-switching studied by such as John Gumperz (1961;1982) and Dell Hymes (1962) as part of an 'ethnography of speaking'?

#### **From multilingual classification to ontology**

One difference between crossover speech and code-switching (seen as speech alternating within single sentences between use of morphemes recognisable as deriving from different languages) is of focus. Rampton liked my suggestion (in an email communication) that, while the earlier studies of detailed cases of code-switching could be called micro-sociolinguistics, his and his colleagues' approach was that of nano-sociolinguistics. It is concerned with conversation analysis (CA), whose constituent features are smaller than those making up codes and require longer within any stretch to decipher. The suggestion was made in jest but underlines a tendency and perhaps a need, given the greater complexity of superdiversity, to analyse minute fractions of the borrowings and exchanges characteristic of much speech in late modern urban settings.

This perspective is a methodological response to the new and more varied population and linguistics flows whose intermingling of boundaries and identities invites a closer look at how

elements of a communicative act cohere. Language ideology, its forms, and the way these are expressed in social interaction constitute a three-part interrelationship (some would say dialectic). Thinking of this interrelationship as a triangle (see e.g. Hanks 1996:230), we can say that it has been stretched into more triangular shapes than was the case before the polycentric normative effects of modern superdiversity. Wide differences among interlocutors as to the relative value, modes of articulation and interpersonal relevance of particular speech features need not nowadays seem to be a 'foreign' incursion into a 'mainstream' speech variety but can be thought of as belonging within a broad notion of 'normality'.

For example, Rampton (forthcoming) examined the speech of a man who only started speaking English in the UK as an adult. He showed that the man's 'learned' English unconventionally combined features which were however spread among other speakers who would not be regarded as learners. The point is that it is nowadays harder to separate as a category those who have learned English as a second language from other speakers, because these other speakers may also use such combinations in English as a first language. They are together making use of the variety of language resources available through superdiversity.

Consider not only Rampton's examples but also those of Jørgensen et al (2011) in their analysis of the deployment of fractional features. In one of their cases, overlapping features of standard Danish, youth Danish, English, Spanish, Turkish and Arabic are used by three Copenhagen girls in the space of just a few exchanges of conversation. As in youth language generally such features are adopted rapidly (and in some cases discarded swiftly), many of them stylised for effect, a development to which I return below. It is difficult consistently to attribute the variable use of these features to changing topics or conversational domains.

Gumperz and some of his colleagues acknowledged this in the nineteen seventies. On the one hand, drawing on his earlier work, Gumperz recognised that there were occasions when a partic-

ular speech variety and a particular social event or setting would go together and that a change in the language or variety might change the social setting and vice versa (Blom and Gumperz 1970; Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez 1972). On the other hand, he also provided contrary instances of conversational code-switching between words of English and Spanish where such close correlations did not apply nor could be predicted. He showed moreover that switching between codes or varieties did more than communicate the meaning of the particular words used but also metaphorically drew on the social associations each variety might have – to articulate a particular speech variety was to take on some of the stereotypical social characteristics of its speakers. Gumperz here took a step in a movement away from classification, and nowadays this is even greater. As represented in the current papers, the features making up codes can no longer be regarded as unambiguously belonging to particular languages, for they are imperceptibly merged with other features of different provenances and do not alter by topic

Fishman's interest was more macroscopic than the later Gumperz and was tied to the idea of a language as belonging to a group whose speakers would each share a loyalty to their distinctive language (Parkin 1974; Spotti 2011). He described language shift and stability. This illustrates the most obvious case of languages seen as relatively bounded entities subject to change from contact with others or able to withstand such change or, as in some of Fishman's examples, incorporating some changes while preserving an 'original' essence. Fishman's recorded material, especially on the relation in urban United States between Spanish and English, is exemplary and did indeed at that time suggest both an ideological and practiced distinctiveness of two languages seen analytically as well as indigenously separable, a distinctiveness that then, as now, has ideological-cum-political significance in defining acceptable citizenship. It is a view of integrated speech, in Jørgensen's terms (2011), in which a noticeable degree of language distinctiveness is maintained, and which educators and policy makers assume is 'natural'.

So, just as the world has allegedly undergone the transition within a generation from (urban) diversity to superdiversity as a result of historical developments, is there a commensurately different linguistic horizon today in much of the world from that which existed in, say, the 1960s and 1970s, to say nothing of even earlier periods?

It would be indulgent to dwell long on one's own researches at that time in the cities of Nairobi in Kenya and Kampala, Uganda. But it should be mentioned that migration to each city, as in many African cities consequent on the expulsion in the early 1960s of French, British and Belgian colonialism (Portuguese fifteen years later), consisted heavily of new migrants from rural areas many of which were, if not monoglot, at least defined in terms of a self-perceived single 'mother tongue' vernacular hedged around with other languages used at trading centres and markets. Nairobi under the British, after all, discouraged Africans from becoming permanent residents in the city and so urban ethno-linguistic admixture was small compared with today. A non-colonial 'traditional' city like Kampala was, by contrast, already ethnically and linguistically mixed, though even there LuGanda, the language of the dominant BuGanda kingdom, was seen by everyone as the ideological standard to which one should aspire if one wanted the benefits of Ganda 'citizenship'. But it was the British and other imperialists of Africa who insisted on falsely demarcating peoples as unambiguously belonging to 'tribes'. It was false because pre-colonial movement, trade, inter-marriage and alliances had precluded set boundaries and borders (Southall 1970). But in imposing them, the imperialists in fact created a sense of bounded ethno-linguistic distinctiveness which became partially reinforced in practice and has become the bane of modern national politics.

The colonial project of ethno-linguistic essentialisation did not in practice curb language mixing, and indeed studies were made of it in Nairobi and Kampala (Parkin 1971 and 1974). But colonial essentialising did foster an ideological view on the part of African speakers of the coexistence of not just ethnic groups but also

languages as discrete entities which could be found in allegedly 'pure' form somewhere, perhaps in a notional rural heartland. There was, in other words, the coexistence of, on one hand, an ideology of linguistic pluralism and individual purity, and on the other hand, increasing heteroglossia, especially with greater urban migration. Such language mixing may indeed be said now to have grown more complex in conjunction with denser urban settlement, and yet still juxtaposed to colonially derived ideas of language separateness and purity. The two, language ideologies of purity, and crossover talk, continue today, reflecting a similar duality in Europe.

Pre-colonial extensive African networks of trade, political absorption, movement to new farming, pastoral and hunting land, and inter-marriage did spread the use of a number of vernaculars. To that extent there was some indigenous linguistic diversity. But it was hardly on the scale of modern superdiversity. For, by the latter, we understand the situation in late modern urban settings, and, with predictions that the majority of the world's population will be living in cities by about 2025, there clearly has been a qualitative shift. More research on older archives and records is needed to say more about this shift and to compare earlier with present periods.

Underlying such history of apparent polylingual change, is a theoretical distinction. In the English language we can interrogate the verb, 'identify', with reference to the ways in which allegedly different speech varieties are classified and have effect on social relations. For a speaker to identify a speech variety as different from others is to classify it as one might an object. The act sets up a classificatory grid which is ideological insofar as it is based on a perception and claim which may depart from the fact that the variety is not really that neatly distinctive of others and in some respects overlaps with them. By contrast, for a speaker to identify *with* a speech variety is to embody it or, perhaps, to be embodied by it, with echoes of empathy and Levy-Bruhl's notion of '*participation*' by which the speaker and the variety share in each other's being: I do not just speak it, for it is part of my being even when I do

not speak it. To identify *with* is then ontological and not just classificatory.

I raise this distinction because I have the impression that earlier sociolinguistics tended towards the 'objective' classification of speech varieties and their social and conceptual correlates. A primary task was to show how speakers make, or are induced to make, choices as between varieties or registers according to the socio-cultural domain in which they are operating or the topic on which they are speaking. As mentioned above, the later Gumperz was different in that his approach to metaphorical code-switching understood varieties as coming from different settings and informing speakers with identities built on such variation. It was to that extent moving towards a view of conversations as ontological processes and not just one of speakers collectively classifying and being classified by the languages around them. The papers in this issue are in part heirs to Gumperz but go further and strongly depict the use of not just spoken language but also other semiotic resources (text, visual, dress, music). Their usage is seen as intrinsic to and part of the migratory and social superdiversity that for at least a generation characterises cities.

I deal with the notion of semiotic resources in more detail below. But I should here briefly note that it is different from the notion of urban language resources as used in the late 1960s in Nairobi by Parkin (1974) who explicitly adopted a transactionalist market model in which sellers and buyers of different, unambiguously defined ethnic groups at a market made challenges and concessions to each other by including parts of each other's language in a game to gain custom or a lower price. The resources were seen as directly deriving from ethnic languages whose boundaries were maintained despite the reciprocal borrowing in the market transactions. It was a view of resources in the economic sense and of ethnic groups regarded by townfolk as distinctive of each other. The classificatory predominated over the ontological, with only strains of the latter identified (e.g. Parkin 1971).

### **The semiotic creation of identity**

Use of semiotic resources in the current and the previous special issue *Language and Superdiversities* does not unambiguously classify social strata and ethnic groups but creates and draws from communicative outlines that cut across them and blur their contours. I contend that the papers address two consequences. One is that contemporary polylinguaging is an ontological act on the part of speakers to empower themselves or to project a desired or appropriate personal image, perhaps in accordance with some kind of network membership but not tied to a domain or topic in the broader sense given above. The other is that this creation of identity is through semiotic stylisation, which by non-standard means projects new identities or reinforces existing ones, sometimes allowing change from one to the other.

The distinction between the earlier tendency to classify on the basis of language varieties and the current concern to show individuals' ontological and stylistic deployment of semiotic resources is not watertight. But it does seem to constitute a broad if overlapping shift. Referring again to John Gumperz, Levinson says Gumperz in his early days was 'interested in how social groups express and maintain their otherness in complex societies. Gumperz started as a dialectologist interested in tracking down the forces of standardization and particularly those of differentiation, and it was the search for where these forces are located that has led him inexorably from the macrosociological to the micro-conversational perspective; it was a long journey from the study of regional standards, to ethnic groups, to social networks, to the activation of social boundaries in verbal interaction, to discourse strategies' (Levinson 1997:1; and see Gumperz 1982; 1984). Levinson points out that Gumperz's later work on code-switching tried to reconcile the macro- (the group classification effect) with the micro- (the discursively strategic) through analysis of the individual speaker. He also wanted to explain how a speaker's utterance could be interpreted in different and sometimes conflicting ways among interlocutors depending on their own respective backgrounds. In this

attempt, he turned to 'the careful analysis of prosody, the neglected acoustic cues that might help to explain how we can possibly mean so much by uttering so little' (Levinson *ibid*). I recall Gumperz in London in the 1980s describing how the distinctive prosody of immigrant South Asian bus conductors in speaking to passengers sometimes came across as impolite and even hostile, marking and so making them different from the indigenous 'mainstream'. They were regarded as not just different speakers of English but as different persons of different behavioural disposition (personal communication).

A recent example of how the ontological may be at the root of misunderstood polylinguaging is provided by Blommaert (2011). He shows how, in the United Kingdom, an asylum seeker claiming Rwandan nationality did not speak Rwandan (KiNyaRwanda or OruNyaRwanda) as his first language. For a person not to know well the language of their official nationality is quite common in that region of east-central Africa where wars and drastic population displacement have thrust people into numerous speech enclaves away from their or their parents' natal origin, often to the detriment of any so-called 'mother tongue', to use that Eurocentric misnomer. The British home office rejected the application on the grounds that a person must have an original nationality and should therefore be able to speak the language of that nationality. In this case a man's alleged mother tongue should not only define his very being, its apparent absence disqualifies him from acceptable being, a classic case of the 'methodological nationalism' (where the modern nation, state, society or ethnic group is regarded as the natural analytical or investigative starting-point) that is critiqued by several papers in this issue.

Let me give some examples of the ontological turn in linguistic ethnography from the papers in this issue. Following on from the case of the Rwandan refugee in the United Kingdom described by Blommaert, Spotti (2011) continues the theme by showing how immigration authorities (as with other European states) test immigrants' knowledge of the host language, Dutch, as a major criterion of admission to the Nether-

lands and of 'civic integration'. On the back of this demand has grown a whole industry of private Dutch language courses for applicants, who are in effect being constructed in this way as acceptable Dutch citizens. It is not enough to know the host society's cultural norms. Proficiency in its language is also required. To demonstrate such linguistic competence through being tested is *ipso facto* to become regarded as a productive member of the society.

The language makes the person, or perhaps remakes him/her. Roberts's analysis of British job interviews shows how they are a form of institutional gatekeeping. It describes how judgements about immigrants' fitness as potential employees (and, by implication, citizens) becomes based on a standardised mode of linguistic competence and often disregards their work experience in another country prior to coming to the UK. The interviewees are in effect penalised for not using the language of assumed competence despite their previous skills. They may not be the 'right' person for the job in the ears, if not the eyes, of the interviewers, despite the late modern legal and institutional prohibition of such discriminatory barriers as ethnicity and class.

The irony, as with all the various European entry tests, is that ordinary everyday speech of most or many citizens bears sometimes limited resemblance to the formal language which the applicants have to learn. The heteroglossic urban vernaculars characteristic of all European cities nowadays is in fact what the new immigrants will have to learn for everyday purposes, including that of getting a job and being the productive member of society that is desired by government. But urban mixed vernaculars have ambivalence. They may not help the applicant in a formal job interview where language proficiency based on measurable, standard features is demanded. They may however help the immigrant get a job in the so-called informal employment sector where forms of non-standard English are in common use among small-scale employers of both indigenous and immigrant origin. Moreover, it can be suggested that use of the urban mixed vernaculars may among some people offer a kind of resistance to official government language

and educational policy (cf. Urla 1995 on Basque), rather like breakaway religions in some societies resisting formally established faiths. In absorbing these urban vernaculars, people set themselves apart as a separable category. An extension of the irony, therefore, is that it is not the monoglot English, Dutch or other mainstream European language that is likely to define the person, whether new immigrant or long-settled, but their capacity for polylinguaging through knowledge of urban mixed vernaculars, as is the case to some degree for much of the population. So-called BBC standard English is, after all, consistently spoken by only a minority of the country's population.

The case of African marabouts' self-advertisements in France shows how even writing styles can effect an ontological 'realignment' of the person. The marabouts deliberately cultivate the impression of poor French literacy in their written advertisements for their clairvoyant and divinatory skills, for this is how best to persuade potential French clients that they are truly authentic African practitioners, conforming therefore to French stereotypes of them. Thus self-classified, they take on the behavioural characteristics of the stereotype in their relations with customers. As Vigouroux (2011: 53) pithily puts it: '*...ways of writing* become iconic of *...ways of being*. She further says, 'Distinctive ways of writing ..are an essential part of marabouts' *doing being African*'.

Shading into speaking and writing as elements of semiosis are the visual signs and productions that punctuate most forms of everyday discourse. In their introduction to the previous special issue, *Language and Superdiversities*, Blommaert and Rampton (2011) provide an example of a calligraphic text found on a building in Antwerp which advertises rental accommodation and is written in two forms of Chinese language script. The traditional script probably indicates the writer as a long-standing Chinese immigrant from outside the People's Republic of China (PRC) while the more modern seems aimed at newer arrivals from within the PRC. It also gives the rent in Yuan rather than Euro and overall suggests a transition in the population of the Chinese diaspora as well as telling us something of the writer and the

intended addressees. The visual is implicated in the linguistic in such a way, then, that two quite different social sub-categories are defined within the wider category of Chinese incomer: new ones from the PRC and older ones from outside it. They are defined separately according to different language scripts whose effect is visual as much as it is textual.

That meaning is thus multi-modal has been a rich source for understanding different kinds and intensities of communication, whether of propositions or moods (e.g. phatic communion). But, like semiosis and indeed as part of it, ontological person-making is also multi-modal. It may start with a person being fitted into a stereotypical class or category of persons on the basis of visual and acoustic signs distinguishing them. But, ingrained in habitus over time, each person so classified reproduces, exaggerates, and believes in the semiotic features allegedly making up that stereotype.

In addition to the example of the Antwerp advert linguo-visually setting up two categories of Chinese, there is that of the YouTube genre of 'buffalaxed videos' described by Leppänen and Häkkinen. These are made up of fragments of films and music videos taken from different cultural backgrounds. The production as a whole is subtitled in the language of the maker which is however homophonic with words drawn from other languages in which the video clips are presented. These original languages are commonly unknown to the video producer and viewer. The juxtaposition and co-occurrence of homophonic subtitles and original language snippets lend themselves to interpretation as new meanings, and so provide what the authors call 'affordances' in which identities and relationships can be represented or, as I would suggest, can be made. Every viewer can find something in the mixture which speaks to their own identity. Indeed it is a form of identity-making which transcends, through its superdiversity, that of conventional contours of ethnicity. It also achieves much of its effect through humour which belittles the many forms of Otherness, justified as harmless fun by some but rejected by others as politically incorrect.

It is an ambivalent genre for which stand-up comedians are noted. Comedians are successful to the extent that they can draw a line between the acceptable and unacceptable while straddling but not crossing it. But their reputations can plunge should they fail in this by saying something regarded by enough people as unambiguously 'racist', 'classist', 'sexist' or 'ageist'. These labels are the modern demarcators not just of moral behaviour but of the proper person, who avoids being so labelled and vice versa. The videos are then more than representational. As is evident through the use of the ecological concept of affordances, they allow viewers to see how they might fit into ontological spaces provided by the mix of identity and relationship possibilities: as in one example, is one gay or straight in one's relationship to an available girl?

The ontological is about being and presence and, as such, is commonly expressed through the body or body parts. Goffman throughout his work shows how the 'presentation of self' is not just the giving out of cognitive cues but is also to do with posture, gesture, physical and bodily orientation, distance in relation to others, and face-work or ways of looking at and speaking with. In China the metaphor of 'face' has been much documented as a fundamental feature of status qualification: appearance is everything – at whatever level of social class; and it is seen and assessed from the 'front', whether of a house or a person, for the 'back' has no face and value and can even be neglected. While probably most societies have a similar form of interpersonal evaluation, the notion of face in China does seem to have special significance in occupying an inordinate area of peoples' concerns in daily interaction.

What is interesting, therefore, in Dong's account is the importance of 'voice' in contemporary China. Of Bakhtinian origin, this is her term and not that of her informants, though they are perfectly aware of the effects of different modes of language articulation. She uses voice in a conjoined metaphorical and direct manner to refer mainly to types of language use. But we may see how it can be extended in other situations to include differences between high and low status speech varieties, as in Dong's

case, and of dialect, pronunciation, pitch, talk-speed, politeness, prosody, and other features of speech, including its absence, i.e. silence, as also being semiotic. 'Face' appears to be about maintaining integral and honourable selfhoods between equals, as for instance between a shop buyer and seller (personal experience in Hong Kong). 'Voice' tends towards the assertive insofar as it seeks to advance or defend selfhood and is less concerned to maintain it or create equality between speaker and listener. We may speculate on whether superdiversity and greater interpersonal competition for goods, life-styles and influence in rapidly urbanising, capitalist China has made 'voice' a more prevalent feature of semiotic interaction than 'face' which belongs more to an earlier premise of equality<sup>2</sup>.

Dong's account is set among Chinese elite migrants who define themselves in terms of class and status hierarchy. Her self-selected group of wealthy Saab automobile owners reject use and even knowledge of such regional speech varieties as Shanghainese, which they regard as limited in its communicative and status value. The Saab car defines them as an exceptional elite whose expensive consumer interests converge and who come together in order to save the Saab company from bankruptcy and themselves from loss of their status symbol. As cosmopolitans rejecting the regional language as demeaning, they celebrate instead their knowledge both of Putonghua, the national Chinese language, and English. Dong's theoretical point is that having the 'right voice' enables people to be heard more widely than through regional vernaculars such as Shanghainese. It gives them what she calls repertoires of mobility, one throughout China by means of Putonghua and the other internationally through English.

This is an important argument about the dynamics of voice and social stratification and is analysed with the broad sweeps of the brush that current socio-linguistic stratification in China invite. One can apply the same argument more microscopically however to situations on which we have data. For example, differences of accent

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<sup>2</sup> Based on an observation made by Rampton.

in the United Kingdom, where much class prejudice, antagonism and rejection rest on the polarisation of so-called lower class and middle class pronunciations (e.g. 'estuary' and 'posh'), pitch and tone, with regional accents variably rated, sometimes treated as lower class and sometimes as standing outside it. Similarly, though in terms of regional rather than class differentiation, Swahili in Kenya is broadly distinguished as either up-country (*ya bara*) or coastal (*ya pwani*), the latter regarded as 'correct' and 'pure' and the former as at best of pragmatic usefulness only. Such distinctions belie the complicated realities. Coastal Swahili is itself further distinguished both regionally through its many, sometime mutually unintelligible forms, and as to whether it contains more Arabic than Bantu expressions. It is likewise difficult to talk unambiguously of up-country Swahili, given such rapid transformations of the Sheng type, which challenge the very idea of a single Swahili diatype. Estuary English similarly varies across much of central and southern England and in fact may overlap with regional types and residues, with middle class posh English rated above estuary but below 'royal' or 'aristocratic' speech of the 'hise', 'trizers' (for 'house' and 'trousers') variety.

Here we see 'voice' as the individual speaker's ability or inability to communicate successfully in a specific situation, doing so through adoption of a particular conventionalised 'style', the appropriateness of which determines the success or failure of the communication. As Rampton notes, 'style/voice tension is experienced in many social sites, as people struggle to match their expressive resources to the requirements of the situation' (personal communication March 2012).

'Voice' in this sense may then hover over the possibility either of deriving from or building on the stylisations of social categories which, like the speech varieties and registers, are in fact much more diverse than their stereotypes. 'Higher' speech forms embedded unambiguously in social hierarchies seem moreover to move up and away when threatened from below. Thus once the voice immediately below begins to approach in imitation the one above it, the latter develops new aspects of voice, principally pro-

nunciation but also other speech elements and lexicon. Rampton's findings in London suggest that this process will become ever more complicated through superdiversity, as older ethnic and class differences are cut across by new kinds of hierarchised speech forms under the pressure of, and in partial 'resistance', to standard language regimes.

An interesting question is whether voice, as an expression of assertiveness, will develop a kind of autonomy of movement that precedes the creation of recognised social groupings. That is to say, will new experimental forms of voice, as defined above, be used at a pace which exceeds that of observable social differentiation? To put it simply, is class in the older sense already lagging behind voice in some late modern cities such as London, at least among the young and those older speakers exposed earlier to the process? Imagine a lower class speaker of either immigrant or indigenous origin working in the City of London, retaining his version of Estuary but, with like-speaking colleagues, setting themselves up as a desirably successful reference group in money-making skills and conspicuous consumption. Certainly media exploitation of class and regional styles, as in television adverts and some soaps, often celebrates what were once low status attributes.

Back with Dong's case, we note that the elite status of the Saab owners is threatened by the possibility that a reduction in the price of the automobile will bring in 'other' people who can now afford it but who are not regarded as of their status. The elite then distances itself further through even more consumerism by buying expensive wines, cigars and playing golf in addition to continuing to buy Saab cars. Through semiosis a status category of relatively unconnected individuals develops a common interest and agency. Semiosis thus mediates the transition from classification to ingrained ontology. It is the equivalent of the British upper classes traditionally altering pronunciation, prosody and vocabulary in order to distance themselves from evident imitation by lower strata, a subtle process which occurs slowly and perhaps largely unconsciously.

Continuing with China we have a case where 'vernacular' does not connote the regional limitations that the Saab owners ascribe to Shanghai. Varis and Wang show how a particular form of hip-hop rapping in Beijing makes use of various global vernacular varieties. They make up a mix and create what the authors call super-vernaculars. These are 'global ways of fashioning identities, forms of communication, genres, etc., recognizable for members of emergent super-groups'. They share indexical orders, and 'super-communities' are constructed through them. This coordination and bringing together of the different bits and pieces of global vernaculars is made possible through the internet, or at least the internet makes it possible for the mix to reach very many more people than would otherwise be the case.

The difference between the more face-to-face 'club' of Saab owners and the internet hip-hop rappers and audience, both within China, illustrates two uses of English. Saab club English complements Putonghua but both are viewed as relatively distinct and bounded, for that is how they can be stratified. Shanghai is rejected and cannot therefore 'muddy' either of the two main languages, whose discrete boundedness is therefore reinforced through non-interference by the vernacular. By contrast, English for the Beijing rapper 'is the supervernacular template', into which are inserted the chosen elements of Chinese and Korean (related to current Chinese enthusiasm for Korean pop culture). Moreover, this template provides 'affordances' (to use again the term employed in two of the papers (Leppänen and Häkkinen *supra*; Varis and Wang (2011) because it is made up of such a variety of language use, clothing and other signs taken from different sources that speakers can creatively make up new combinations in the rapping lyrics and images. The thrust of this paper is indeed to show how such creativity jostles with normative constraints in a kind of search for authenticity: 'true' rap or hip-hop is Afro-American and yet is presented with a Chinese accent and so is also 'really' Chinese, possessing rebelliousness and yet working within limits of Chinese public acceptability. One image presented in the paper

is of 'a young Afro male, suggesting an alignment with "hip-hop authority" embodied in blackness – being and doing "black".' It reminds us again of the marabouts doing and being 'African' so as to conform to Parisians' stereotypes of them. This is clearly an ontological consequence, i.e. creating an identity, which draws on semiotic resources. It is to the theme of these resources, central to all the presentations, that I now turn. Indeed, 'resources' is a word that occurs more than any other in the papers.

### **Semiotic resources, repertoire and style**

The concern with resources presupposes speakers as agents. They are agents not in the unobtrusive or logocentric sense of calculating beforehand the effects of speech, but as having an effect on listeners without necessarily intending that effect. Insofar as we can distinguish it, this is communicative intention which is implicit to speaking in context. In other words, we may intend something but may also elaborate on meaning as we go along, as part of performing the utterance. Putting this crudely, we often know the full sense of what we have said only after we have said it and observed its effect on the listener, sometimes to our dismay but usually without cause or wish to reflect on that sense. Resources are, by definition, there to be used or exploited, and so we must be talking about processes of speaking which draw on them as part of the speech act but without singular, aim-directed consciousness.

This view of the relationship between resources and action departs from a much earlier view prevalent in the 1960s of transactional analysis. This argued that actors are impelled to maximise gains at minimal cost, using resources consisting not just of material goods but also of emotions, reputations, and interactional skills (Barth 1966). In Nairobi in the late 1960s, Parkin (1974) looked at the use of language resources in an urban market place. There sellers and buyers of different, unambiguously defined ethnic groups made challenges and concessions to each other by including parts of each other's language in a serious game to gain custom or a lower price. The resources were seen as directly deriving from ethnic languages whose boundar-

ies were maintained despite the reciprocal borrowing in the market transactions. It was a view of resources in the economic sense and of ethnic groups regarded by townfolk as distinctive of each other. The classificatory predominated over the ontological, with only strains of the latter identified (e.g. Parkin 1971). Whereas that view focused on actors' strategies, with language resources waiting as objects to be gathered for use, the current papers place greater emphasis on the wider range of semiotic resources as comprising the non-verbal as well as verbal, how they are created and used for new forms of communication, and on how they are inextricably part of the (changing) selfhoods of their speakers.

Their approach is concerned with the evolution of environments of linguistic opportunity resulting from the superdiversity of semiotic modes and sensibilities operating together. This approach does of course set up (the outlines of) social categories of users, as discussed above. I perceive however something near to a generative explanation: superdiversity produces 'affordances' and opportunities for semiotic cross-overs which produce further diversity at an often bewildering pace, as seemingly befits the current global age. A couple of authors even talk of superdiversity as a generative logic which is not unreasonable at a certain level of analysis but raises the question of what are the triggers of choice and change among speakers.

Perhaps this is to ask how semiotic resources become what Blommaert and others have referred to as a semiotic repertoire (Blommaert and Varis 2011; 2012). That is to say, resources exist out there ready to be garnered; a repertoire is a particular ordering of them. How do we get from the first to the second? And how do speakers/communicators avoid the hazards of being unfamiliar with harvestable signs and voices and of not understanding them. In other words, resources may be out there but we cannot always know them well enough to arrange and use them to good effect. More confidently, Varis and Wang (2011) suggest that 'the meanings attached to semiotic signs... are not random, but systematic, stratified and context-specific: we attribute meaning to signs according to

conventionalised normative patterns'. Similarly, Dong (*supra*) asserts that 'Linguistic resources are never distributed in a random way....(they) are distributed according to the logic of the social system, and sociolinguistic analysis has from its inception addressed these non-random aspects of distribution'.

However, the papers also talk of the creativity involved in building up and presenting new multi-modal semiotic repertoires. Creativity presupposes non-normative innovation, i.e. by transcending the non-random norms. So how can we be creative, i.e. non-normative, if meaning is drawn from the normative? The answer seems to be that it is by taking norms out of their conventionalised patterns, mixing them and presenting them for effect. The effect would seem to be to highlight a message or to package it in a special way. Its packaging is therefore likely to be a matter of style as well as of communication. That is to say, the way we communicate and create 'truths' about ourselves and our interlocutors is conveyed by a changing variety of styles and is not governed by a uniform logic.

This emphasis on style comes out directly or indirectly in many papers, most evidently as an aspect of the various forms of youth speech and pop-culture, including visual, acoustic and dress, and especially as a feature of late modern urban society. It is true that 'style' has a standard linguistic connotation of identifying a linguistic variety. Jørgensen et al suggest that, in this sense, it is one of a number of unacceptably delimited ways of analysing language, because it does not reflect the reality of speech for which the idea of semiotic resources is necessary instead. Style is of course also used in a number of different ways, for example as mode or register, covering form, interaction and ideology and not just delimited speech varieties. There is also the distinctive, everyday social connotation of trying to impress an audience, of being a discursive strategy, or style or stylisation as ontologically enacted. The papers give many examples: the use of English and Afro images in Chinese hip-hop/rap; of highly rated Creole among South London schoolchildren; the choice of 'cool' music and lyrics from different cultures as in the buffalaxed videos; the

display of magic in 'doing African' of the Paris marabouts; the status-conscious brandishing of cigars, wine, cars and golf club membership among the Chinese Saab owners; and, reaching out for the classification that may provide the conditions for national acceptance, the almost ceremonial parading of lavish language test certificates for migrants and asylum seekers in European cities. Being culturally defined, the absence of style contributes to communicative disadvantage or is regarded as linguistic incompetence, as among the immigrant job-seekers unfamiliar with British styles described by Roberts.

Style for impression-management is clearly both semiotic resource and part of a repertoire. It is likely also to be consubstantial with bodily use and images, as the examples just given suggest. The linguistic is part of this semiotics but seems almost to be drowned in its multi-modality. However we can see such multi-modality as creating a stylised semiotic package, in which speech, texts, non-verbal sounds and the visual inter-

twine. The packages serve two main demands made of interlocutors: to act ontologically in the sense of interacting with others on the same semiotic wave-length; and to impress listeners and bystanders. That they also classify, instruct, persuade, admonish and promise seems to me to follow in the wake of style in actual social contexts in conditions of late modern urban superdiversity.

Our interest may indeed be in a general semiology, of which language is but one strand, possibly absent altogether in, say, silent rituals lacking verbal and textual comment. But, as a matter of heuristic choice rather than of theoretical stance, it can be argued that language normally provides an empirically convenient starting-point for tracing out the other different visual and acoustic sign systems that accompany, substitute for, blend with and shadow speech. The caveat is not to return to bounded, essentialised speech varieties and languages as the initial building blocks of what we observe and study.

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# Engendering indigenous Mexican migration into the United States. A case of study of the Yalálag Zapotec Women\*

By Adriana CRUZ-MANJARREZ

## Abstract

Over the last three decades, a significant number of studies of Mexican migration to the United States have examined the significance of gender in structuring migration and the ways in which migration has transformed the lives of immigrant women. In this article, I expand this research by focusing on the effects of immigration on gender as it relates to the experience of indigenous Mexican women in the United States. I concentrate on these women's experiences in relation to the situation of indigenous immigrant men and assess how immigration affects their gendered perceptions and social locations in their families, marriages, and home community in Mexico and the United States. I argue that after 50 years of Yalálag Zapotec migration to the United States, migration has been at the intersection of multiple changes in gender relations across two generations of Yalálag Zapotec immigrant women, who see and experience migration as a form of liberation. Further, I wish to demonstrate that the migration experiences of these immigrant women have impacted the lives of non-immigrant women at home.

Keywords: Indigenous Mexican migrants, transnationalism, gender, family, marriage

In this article, I examine the effects of immigration on gender as it relates to the experience of indigenous women in the United States. I concentrate on these women's experiences in relation to the situation of indigenous immigrant men and assess how immigration affects their gendered perceptions and social locations in their families, marriages, and ethnic community in Mexico and the United States. Building on the research of others (González-López 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hirsch 2003; Stephen 2002), I begin my discussion with an analysis of how gender has structured the migration of Yalálag Zapotec

women to Los Angeles and how migration has transformed gender relations of immigrant and non-immigrant women and men in the Yalálag Zapotec community, as socio-cultural patterns are reconfigured differently and patriarchal relations undergo change across time and space. I wish to argue that economic, political, and social causes of migration have intersected with gender change as it relates to marriage, family, and community relationships across two generations and two localities: Los Angeles and Yalálag. Further, I wish to argue that migration has allowed Yalálag Zapotec women to articulate gender change through 'a sense of emancipation'.

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## Research on migration, women, family, and marriage

In the last three decades, a significant number of studies of migration and women in the United States have examined the significance

of gender as a central organising principle of migration. According to this research, economic global dynamics and gender have determined specific patterns, routes, and dynamics of migration for men and women, and women have used women's kinship and friendship networks to immigrate and circumvent patriarchal structures within their own families (Cohen 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). In relation to conceptualising how the migration of Yalálag Zapotec women to the United States has evolved between the late 1960s and the mid-2000s, I find that this approach is useful for theorising how and when Yalálag Zapotec women, henceforth Yalaltecas, participated in the migration process, why the experiences of these immigrant women have encouraged non-immigrant women to immigrate, and how immigrant women have created their own networks and used their own economic resources to facilitate the immigration of non-immigrant women to Los Angeles during the last 50 years.

In the extant scholarship on migration and gender, some scholars suggest that as a result of migration, women and men change their understandings of their gender identity, roles, and expectations in their family, marriage, and work (Hirsch 2007; Malkin 2007; Menjivar 2003; Stephen 2007). In this regard, some researchers have found that as women begin to work, they become social and economically independent. Some start entrepreneurial enterprises, send money back home, and raise their children with the help of their husbands or by themselves if they divorce, their marriage falls apart, or their husbands die. In looking at Yalaltecas' social perceptions of their marriage and family relations in the United States, I can confirm that these findings resonate with the discussion presented here.

Over the last 50 years, many Yalaltecas have come to Los Angeles to work in the domestic and service sectors as result of poverty and a lack of employment and schooling in Yalálag. Consequently, the immigrant Yalaltecas have become economically independent, and some have benefited from education. As many of them have sent remittances to their parents in Yalálag and

help relatives and friends to immigrate to the United States, they have gained special recognition in their ethnic community and families. Also, they have learned to negotiate their gender roles with men at home. In contrast to Yalaltec men in Yalálag, immigrant men in Los Angeles share housework, divide home expenses with their wives, and take care of their children. As a result, many Yalaltecas perceive their husbands or male relatives to be more egalitarian and less macho than men in Yalálag. It is important to mention that gender inequalities have changed in Yalálag, but that many women are still economically dependent on their husbands (because of a lack of remunerated employment) and continue to experience gender inequity.

In the early 1990s, the anthropologists Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992) proposed the term transnationalism to describe the strong social, economic, and political relationships maintained by contemporary immigrants with their families, communities, or countries of emigration. The literature on transnational migration with an emphasis on gender points out that as immigrant women transform their lives in ways that are different socially and economically from their non-immigrant counterparts, they influence non-immigrant women to immigrate. Also, as Levitt (2001) suggests, non-immigrant women are encouraged to 'try on new gender roles' and ideas (Levitt 2001: 11) in their place of origin, when they see immigrant women experiencing more egalitarian marriage relations. According to Hirsch (2007), transnational immigrant women, in contrast to women who have not migrated, experience less unequal relationships with their husbands and have access to social justice when domestic violence occurs within their marriages. Yet, while immigrant women experience more egalitarian relations in family and marriage (when compared with their experiences back home, or those of older generations, or the current situation of non-immigrant women in their place of origin), this new equality does not necessarily extend to all aspects of their working and family lives (Espiritu 1997; Foner 1986; Velasco 2007). Namely, patriarchal relations undergo significant transformations

in the migratory setting as immigrant women become economically independent, control their own earnings and lives, participate in marriage and family decision-making, and as the societies in which they live create mechanisms to eradicate gender inequality and move toward a more egalitarian society. However, immigrant women continue to be exposed as women to other forms of social control and gender subordination, such as in their workplace (Espiritu 1997) and in ethnic associations (Goldring 1998).

In this article, I focus on the transnational processes that have shaped gender change in community, family, and marriage relations for Yalaltecas in both Los Angeles and Yalálag. Building on Levitt (2001), Mahler's (2003) and Hirsch (2003) analysis of transnationalism and gender, I offer an investigation of how new gender dynamics in the migratory setting have encouraged some non-immigrant women to immigrate and transformed their expectations as women, mothers, wives, and citizens within their families and ethnic community before and after migration. One argument in this work is that as Yalaltec immigrant women experiment with new ideas about marriage (cf. Hirsch 2003; Stephen 2002) learn about women's rights, and earn more years of schooling; they encourage and help non-immigrant Yalaltec women to immigrate (cf. París Pombo 2006). As I argue elsewhere (Cruz-Manjarrez 2006, 2008), after 60 years of Yalálag Zapotec migration within Mexico and between Mexico and the United States, Yalálag Zapotecs and various aspects of their culture have undergone transformations. Thus, I place my work on gender and indigenous women within a transnational framework (Brettell 2003; Goldring 2001; Stephen 2007) to explain how immigrant women and men have been agents of social change in the transnational Yalálag Zapotec community and culture as reflected in transformations in marriage practices and family dynamics, and the social location of Yalaltecas across three generations of immigrant women and between two localities: Yalálag and Los Angeles.

In this article, I emphasise that Mexican women are diverse and that the category of Mexican immigrant women is not homoge-

nous. Unlike *mestizo*<sup>1</sup> Mexican women, indigenous Mexican women, like the Yalálag Zapotec women, are different in terms of the languages they speak, their group history, culture, religion, marriage practices, family characteristics, and history of migration to the United States. In the migratory context, differences in their 'social location' as indigenous women are significant. They express the specificities of these women's experiences of migration to the United States. In this study, I want to suggest that changes in gender relations as they relate to the 'social location' (Zavella 1991) of Yalaltec immigrant women in their families, marriages, and ethnic community (namely, where women are located in relation to communal social organisation and social institutions) have been the result of a gradual and conscious rupture by immigrant women and men with cultural practices and the gender ideology of their place of origin.

This study was based on qualitative research methods. Through multi-sited fieldwork in Mexico and the United States, I used an ethnographic approach to examine the history of Yalálag Zapotec migration into the United States. By using life-history narratives throughout five decades of international migration, I describe when, how, and why Yalaltec men and women have come to California. To study the impact of migration on gender and women, I used semi-structured and open-ended interviews, informal conversations, and focus groups with immigrant, non-immigrant and second-generation Yalálag Zapotec women and men. For my research in the city of Los Angeles, California, I conducted thirty-six interviews with immigrant women and men, and twenty-five with second-generation Yalálag Zapotecs. For fieldwork in the Zapotec village of Yalálag, Oaxaca, I conducted fifteen interviews with yalaltec women and fifteen with men. Fieldwork in community and family events

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<sup>1</sup> This is a racial category that refers to people in Mexico of a mixed race: indigenous, Spanish, and African roots and blood. This category has its roots in the sixteenth century when the Spanish conquerors divided New World society according to 'purity of blood', namely, in terms of their 'descent and race' (Wimmer 2002).

was conducted in California in 2003, 2007, and 2011. In Yalálag, it was carried out in 2003, 2007, and 2010. This field research included multiple short and month-long visits between 2003 and 2011.

In what follows, I discuss the history of immigration of Yalaltecos to Los Angeles to explain how women have participated in the international migration process.

### **The migration of Yalálag Zapotecs within Mexico and the United States**

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the first groups migrating from Mexico into the United States came from rural areas, mainly from the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, and a few north-western states in Mexico, and consisted of *mestizo* peasant, single men. In the 1940s, major transformations in the patterns of Mexican migration to the United States began to take place; the points of origin in Mexico and the destinations in the United States diversified. The number of immigrants and their ethnicity, race, gender, and class changed. Between the mid-1940s and early 1960s, the Yalálag Zapotecs were drawn into this international migration process. Recruited in Mexico City and Oaxaca City to work in the *Bracero*<sup>2</sup> (farmhand) Program, Yalalteco men began to migrate temporarily to California. In that program, this first generation of migrants was admitted as farm workers on short-term contracts to work in the commercial agricultural fields. In the late 1960s, changes in the selection of labour market opportunities from the agricultural sector to the service sector in the city of Los Angeles transformed the destiny of this group.<sup>3</sup> Some Yalalteco men returned permanently to Yalálag and others went to work in the service sector in Los Angeles.

<sup>2</sup> After World War II, the U.S. and Mexican governments established the guest worker program, better known as the *Bracero* Program, under which Mexicans worked in agriculture and transportation and helped to maintain American railways (see Durand 2007; Hernández 2010; Stout 2008; Tienda 1989).

<sup>3</sup> For additional reading on Zapotec migration to the United States, see Cohen 2004; Hirabayashi 1993; Hulshof 1991; Kearney 2000; Klaver 1997; Malpica 2007; Stephen 2007.

In the 1970s, a new generation of immigrants emerged. This was mainly composed of a few *Braceros* and young men and women, who were the sons and daughters of the *Bracero* generation. Circular migration, permanent settlement in Los Angeles, and new migratory routes within Mexico and to the United States developed. Yalalteco men who visited their families in Yalálag and decided to go back and forth between Los Angeles and Yalálag began to help their brothers, sisters, cousins, or friends immigrate with them. In this decade, men continued to dominate Yalalteco migration to Los Angeles, but a few young Yalalteco women and teenaged girls began to join the migration flow.

During this period, this migratory movement was the result of extreme poverty and socio-economic marginalisation in Yalálag. However, curiosity and adventure also motivated single men and women as well as young married couples without children to migrate. Since they saw the *Braceros* making some money in California, and as some of them had relatives or friends going to Los Angeles, and as a few men had previous experience of migration within Mexico, they decided to try their luck in *El Norte* (the United States). At this moment, these migrants were between the ages of 14 and 30 years old. Most men arrived with a middle or elementary school diploma, while the women, who were about the same age as the men, had fewer years of schooling. As many of these Yalaltecos were single and tended to socialise within their own ethnic group, they began to marry among themselves (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey et al. 1987).

According to Yalalteco immigrants, the early 1980s was a time when many young Yalalteco men and women came to Los Angeles from Yalálag, Oaxaca City, Veracruz, and Mexico City. At this moment, there was a high level of mobility for quite a few young Yalaltecos who migrated between Mexico and the United States, and within Mexico and the United States. Young single women increasingly participated in the international migration process with financing from relatives in the United States for their trip. This finding coincides with that of Cerrutti and Massey (2004), who point out that throughout the 1970s,

Mexican migration to the United States to a great extent consisted of young women whose fathers, husbands, or older brothers had come to the United States illegally, with some eventually obtaining U.S. residency and sponsoring the women's trips. During the 1970s and 1980s, the trend of Yalalteco teenaged girls and single women migrating to Los Angeles and settling there grew into an established model of migration. The number of Yalaltec women who desired to economically support their parents and aspired to become independent rose significantly.

In sharp contrast to the men of the *Bracero* era who migrated temporarily, most of the Yalalteco immigrant men and women who arrived in the 1970s and early 1980s were determined to settle in the United States. One reason for this was family formation and the birth of Yalalteco children in the United States. Another reason was family reunification (Chavez 1985; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey et al. 1987). A third and perhaps more important reason was the 1986 amnesty for undocumented immigrants. In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) to legalise the status of illegal 'aliens' and to stop the rise in undocumented migration into the United States. As part of this program, the U.S. Congress made a few changes in the annual quotas for immigrants from Cuba and Haiti and underrepresented countries. This created a law that sanctions employers who hire unauthorised immigrants. That year, it was estimated that about five million undocumented immigrants were in the United States (Ueda 1994), including many Yalaltec women who had arrived between the late 1960s and early 1980s. When the U.S. Congress launched amnesty for unauthorised immigrants, the majority of the Yalalteco immigrants I interviewed applied for the legalisation and regularisation of their migratory status.

In the late 1980s, many Yalalteco immigrants became permanent residents through the IRCA. Overall, these new U.S. residents made up two groups. The first was composed of undocumented Yalaltec women who were married and had children born in the United States when the amnesty was launched. The second group of immigrants was made up of Yalaltec women who

applied within the amnesty deadline. They were single men and women and young married couples with no children or with children born in Mexico. While married Yalaltec women's main motivation was to legalise their status because of their children, single men and women also did so because they were determined to settle in the United States. They wanted to work legally and move back and forth between Mexico and the United States. In 1987, many Yalalteco immigrants regularised their migratory status, while others did not. Those who applied for amnesty were interested in becoming legal residents and met the requirements. Timing, intentions to return to Mexico, or their recent arrival influenced those who did not apply.

Throughout the late 1980s, undocumented Yalalteco migration in Los Angeles continued to increase through the expansion of dense migrant networks. In contrast to the family stage migration model (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994), whereby husbands migrate before their wives and children, for most Yalaltec women, the move from Mexico to the United States depended on social networks that included friendship as well as kinship relationships. The siblings of the immigrants who had arrived in the 1970s and early 1980s set out to migrate to Los Angeles by persuading their older immigrant siblings, cousins, and friends to help them. Two aspects of Yalalteco migration in the late 1980s particularly stand out. On the one hand, many married immigrant men who had left their children and wives in Yalálag returned permanently to Yalálag. On the other hand, immigrants with U.S.-born children raised in Los Angeles returned to Yalálag, Mexico City, or Oaxaca City, but then remigrated to the United States.

Between the 1990s and mid-2000s, both new and old patterns of Yalálag Zapotec migration developed. In Los Angeles, newcomers were mostly impoverished young single men and women in their teens and early twenties as well as adult women with foreign-born children, married couples with foreign-born children, and couples with no children. A great number of these migrants moved directly from Yalálag to Los Angeles; other first-time immigrant families arrived in Los Angeles from the states of Morelos

and Veracruz. The 1990s saw new changes in the migratory routes as well as a decline in emigration from Yalálag to Oaxaca City and Mexico City; Yalaltecos began to migrate mostly from Yalálag to Los Angeles. Yalaltecos born in Oaxaca City and Mexico City became involved in the international migration process, while a few Yalaltecos born in Yalálag migrated to five different cities within Mexico to work in the service and domestic sectors, and in manufacturing. In the United States, most Yalaltec immigrants lived and worked in Los Angeles, while a few moved permanently to New Jersey, Northern California, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. As mentioned above, in the 1970s and 1980s, many Yalaltecos immigrated and settled in Mexico City, where some started their families. Many Yalaltec teens in Mexico received financial support for academic pursuits from older siblings in Los Angeles. Currently, there are a few Yalaltec men and women in Mexico City and Oaxaca City who are rather successful lawyers, doctors, musicians, dentists, architects, and entrepreneurs. However, others immigrated to Los Angeles due to the lack of educational opportunities, secure and well-paid jobs, and a declining standard of living in Mexico.

In the mid-1990s, the constant decline in the peasant economy, the restructuring of agricultural production, changes in agricultural policies, and a continuing lack of state and federal investment in education, health programs, and social security in the state of Oaxaca pushed Yalaltec peasants, merchants, and housewives to immigrate internationally. The married couples who settled in the states of Morelos, Veracruz, and Mexico City in the 1980s, immigrated to Los Angeles in the early 1990s due to the negative effects of Mexico's economic crisis, set off in 1982 by a sharp rise in inflation. Likewise, due to the debt crisis and austerity measures implemented by the Mexican government (Cornelius and Bustamante 1989), many complete nuclear families migrated to Los Angeles (cf. Massey et al. 1987) at this time.

Consequently, the pattern of younger siblings following their older siblings, cousins, and friends presents three significant transformations. First, in addition to young men and women

who followed their older siblings, complete families were arriving in Los Angeles from Yalálag and other urban centres in Mexico. Second, parents reuniting with family members, who were U.S. citizens, permanent U.S. residents, or in some cases undocumented migrants, moved permanently to Los Angeles. Third, a number of young women came to Los Angeles by marrying Yalaltec immigrant men through the almost extinct practice of arranged marriages.

Contemporary Yalaltec migration to the United States has progressively developed with male pioneers working on short-term contracts and returning to Yalálag; family formation, permanent settlement, and acquisition of U.S. residency and American citizenship; and the constant arrival and permanent residence of undocumented immigrants who are steadily incorporated into the U.S. labour market and American society. The arrival of newcomers has been transformed through the maintenance of dense family, friendship, and community networks with satellite communities in areas within Mexico such as Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Morelos, Veracruz, and more recently Puebla, Durango, and the state of Mexico. Unlike the first Yalaltec immigrants' experiences in the United States, contemporary immigrant men and women join their extended families in Los Angeles, participate in extended family life, and integrate into the U.S. labour market through family and friendship networks. These networks have provided information about jobs, housing, and transportation, and have made migration to the United States an imperative factor of economic life in Yalálag.

#### **Migration and emancipation: negotiating gender change in family and community**

Currently, in both Yalálag and Los Angeles, Yalaltecos say: 'Migration emancipated immigrant women.' According to this view, immigrant women have moved away from family and community control, becoming economically independent and 'more open in their way of thinking.' In contrast to non-immigrant women, they have more years of schooling and have transgressed gender norms and behaviours in their family and community. To understand how this happened

and to what extent migration has facilitated changes in gender roles and ideology for immigrant women, it is necessary to consider that Yalaltecas in Los Angeles and in Yalálag refer to changes in gender concepts in terms of differences between a sense of social control and subordination in Yalálag and a sense of emancipation and empowerment in the migratory context, and a sense of 'better social and economic opportunities' outside of Yalálag. In this section, I analyse women's perceptions of gender change in their families, marriage, and community locally in Yalálag, and transnationally between Yalálag and Los Angeles.

In Yalálag, Yalaltecas imagine the United States as a place of freedom and economic opportunity. Los Angeles is socially constructed as a context in which women can subvert patriarchal family and community values, and move up in the social and economic spheres. In this sense, Yalaltecos talk about a sense of liberation and empowerment in relation to migration because immigrant women experience less social control from their families in terms of permission to leave the house -- because according to tradition, a woman should be at home to protect the family honour and guarantee her virginity to her future husband and his family (cf. Stephen 2002: 51) -- as well as in regards to choice of a spouse and more opportunities for schooling. In Yalálag, women describe that they continue to be under the control and authority of men. Women, be they wives, daughters, or sisters, are highly monitored by their fathers, husbands, or brothers. Married women are under the supervision of their parents or parents-in-law. Most young girls who have begun to menstruate are not allowed to leave their homes unless a brother, her mother, or her father accompanies her. Those teenaged girls who never leave their homes are referred to as *las guardaditas* ('the ones who are kept at home'). These girls, who are virgins, are not supposed to be in public until they are married. During religious fiestas, mothers take them for a walk to be seen by men. Young men who may be looking for a wife are able to identify them in these walks just by the sole fact that the girls hang a white shawl on their right arm. In Los

Angeles, young women or second-generation Yalaltecas are never taken for a walk to be seen by men. They have more freedom to be in public spaces and are never kept at home.

#### *Women's work and inheritance*

In Yalálag, according to the gendered division of labour, domestic work and child-rearing are women's responsibility. This work is considered secondary because women 'stay home'. Since there are few job opportunities for women, they mostly depend economically on their husbands. Some of them engage in other forms of productive labour such as weaving textiles, selling fruits, running little stores, and sewing for other women. Yalálag is a self-sustenance community. Men's work consists mainly of producing chili and maize crops. Some manufacture and sell *huarachas* (leather sandals), and a few are employed as construction workers, bakers, or mechanics. In both Yalálag and Los Angeles, Yalaltecas are considered hard workers, but the work of immigrant women is highly valued because they generate an income for their families in both places. In contrast to non-immigrant men, male immigrants mostly work as cooks. In Los Angeles, they share housework and cooking, and negotiate child-rearing with their wives. Immigrant men and women contribute to the family economy, but women do not depend on their husbands' salary as Yalaltecas in Yalálag do.

In this context, the fact that immigrant women are economically independent and share with their husband domestic and family work has changed their social location in their families and ethnic community transnationally. Currently, immigrant women are able to receive an inheritance in Yalálag because it is considered that they have succeeded socially and economically in Los Angeles. Like any Yalalteco man, immigrant women are able to raise their own families, send their children to school, pay rent in Los Angeles, buy land in Oaxaca City, and send remittances to their parents. In contrast, women in Yalálag who do important work at home and for their families are unable to receive an inheritance. As a result, in Yalálag, the distribution of economic resources and land ownership shows significant

changes in favour of immigrant women. In the *Bracero* generation and the next generation of Yalaltec immigrants, only men used to receive their parents' inheritance.

#### *Education and women's political participation*

As mentioned above, some women who have immigrated to Oaxaca City and Mexico City in search of better opportunities have more years of schooling than non-immigrant women in Yalálag and Yalaltec women in Los Angeles. While some Yalaltecas have been able to gain an education in Yalálag, Oaxaca City and Mexico City with the financial help of relatives in Los Angeles, others have not because of two facts: economic distress or lack of support from their fathers. For Yalaltecas, access to higher education is very significant. First of all, in Yalálag, it took almost 50 years to convince the *gente de costumbre* (conservative people) that schooling is a right for women. Second, in Mexico, the federal and Oaxacan state governments have made few efforts to provide education for indigenous groups. In the 1940s, the Mexican government introduced the first and only elementary school in Yalálag. In the late 1950s, Yalaltecos built a middle school and children began to pursue diplomas. In 2002, the first and only high school was opened. In the 1940s, many women were not allowed to go to elementary school because their parents considered that a woman's place was at home and early marriage was expected -- girl became available for marriage as soon as she began to menstruate (Bertely 1996). At present, many immigrant women have middle school and high school diplomas, and second-generation Yalaltecas are finishing college, obtaining B.A. and M.A degrees as a result of migration.

Despite the fact that today a few families in Yalálag continue to favour marriage over education, there are others that favour education over marriage. In 2003, during my fieldwork in Yalálag, I learned that all girls in the village finish elementary school. Those who finish middle school may marry by choice or by their parents' will. They may stay in the village for middle school and high school, or emigrate to Oaxaca City or Mexico City to complete high school or obtain a BA degree.

Single teenaged girls who decide not to study beyond middle school may go to Los Angeles. According to the middle school principal, at present, getting a middle school diploma is a passport to migrate to Los Angeles for teenaged boys and girls.

Yalálag is a village community that organises its social, cultural, and political life on the basis of a system of public posts, known as the traditional government or *sistema de usos y costumbres* (Aquino M. 2002; De la Fuente 1949). According to Gutiérrez Najera (2007), until the 1970s, only a few women participated in public posts. Men, who represented the head of their households, were responsible for fulfilling a series of public posts in their community during their lifetime. Since men did not consider women political actors, they even denied women the right to participate in politics. Women gained the right to vote in Yalálag in 1974. At present, in both Yalálag and Los Angeles, women participate in this system of public posts, but in Los Angeles, immigrant women hold 50% of the community posts (Cruz-Manjarrez 2006). It is important to mention that in the first half of the twentieth century, political, religious, and social work in the traditional government was considered men's work, and women were believed to be unfit for men's roles. In fact, between the 1970s and 1980s, women who did 'men's work' or wanted to do it, were not only considered to be *marimachas* (behaving like men, but not looking like men), but invaders of men's social and political spaces. Currently, in Los Angeles, the community service of immigrant women reflects significant changes in gender ideology in both places and the importance of women's work transnationally.

#### **Immigration intersects with marriage and divorce**

Since the late 1960s, migration has intersected with significant transformations in marriage practices among Yalaltecos. The first generation of immigrants to Los Angeles or within Mexico (mid-1940s to 1969) included married Yalaltec women who migrated with their husbands. These women did not choose their partners and did not engage in any sort of relationship prior to

marriage. The next generation (1970-1989) was composed of some single women who migrated to Los Angeles and then married a Yalalteco man either in Yalálag or in Los Angeles without family intervention. In the subsequent generation of immigrants to Los Angeles (1990-2005), there were married Yalalteco women arriving with their husbands, and a few young immigrant men who still contacted their parents in Yalálag and asked them to look for a wife in the home community. Despite immigrant women's increasing opposition to marrying in accordance with the tradition of arranged marriages and the gradual disappearance of arranged marriages in the Yalálag Zapotec community, a few immigrant men and families continue to sustain and promote this practice.

Marriage and family are two social and economic institutions that have significant implications in the shaping and reproduction of gender concepts across generations and localities (Hirsch 2003). The sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo points out that 'gender informs different sets of social relations that organize immigration and social institutions (e.g., family, labor markets, marriage) in both immigrants' place of origin and place of destination' (2003: 6). In this section, I discuss how migration intersects with changes in gender roles as it impacts marriage and family relations across three generations of Yalalteco women and two localities: Los Angeles and Yalálag.

In both Yalálag and Los Angeles, Yalaltecos are highly endogamous and have a long tradition of arranged marriages.<sup>4</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, as older women recall, marriages were arranged between the parents of a young single man and a teenaged girl. Currently, in Yalálag, older women between the ages of 60 and 70 describe that in their generation, women were not allowed to refuse such arranged marriages or even question them. They had to obey their parents and integrate into their husband's family. In Los Angeles, an immigrant woman told

me that in 1956, she was 13 years old when her parents wed her to a man who was 10 years her senior. Her husband's parents talked to her parents about their son's interest in marrying her. Both families set the day for the wedding and organised all ritual activities. On the day of the religious wedding, she met her husband for the first time. She recalled that when the priest asked her if she accepted that man as her husband, she only wanted to escape. However, because she had to accept the marriage and remain submissive to her father, she said yes. During my interview with this woman, she added, 'If I had had money and the village had had public transportation, as it has today, I would have run away from my family and marriage.' In 1956, Yalaltecos had to ride a mule or walk at least 10 hours to take a bus to reach Oaxaca City. At present, one reaches Oaxaca City in 2.5 hours by car.

Gender scholars suggest that gender is about power and usually about unequal power relations between men and women (Andersen and Hysock 2009). As I found in my interviews with the daughters and granddaughters of the *Brazeros*, many Yalalteco women have not only been forced to marry men chosen by their parents, but their husbands have also made them immigrate to the United States against their will. An immigrant woman said to me that at the age of 14, in 1984, she was forced to marry and to migrate with her husband and mother-in-law to the state of Morelos. She was told that she had to work to make her own contributions to the family expenses. In January 1985, she was taken to Los Angeles against her will. Because of her opposition, her mother-in-law told her that she did not have any right to complain and ask her parents for help. As she recalled: 'My mother-in-law said to me that I belong to her family. I do not mean anything to my family. They sold me.'<sup>5</sup> In addition to this difficulty, she was smuggled across the U.S.-Mexican border.

When I asked this woman what it means that her family sold her, she replied: 'This is the way in which some women are still married.' Women are

<sup>4</sup> It is important to mention that the practice of arranged marriage in this Zapotec community is almost extinct.

<sup>5</sup> Velasco has made the same kind of argument for Mixtec immigrant women in Tijuana (2007: 349).

'sold' because marriage takes place within a system of exchange between families. After a teen-aged girl's and a young man's families arrange a marriage, the girl's family asks the groom's family to provide a certain amount of food supplies that will be cooked the day before the wedding celebration. When the food is served among the girl's relatives and family friends in the bride's house, the guests pay an amount of money for the food they will consume. This means that the money that is raised from the sale of the food will be given to the new couple to begin their new family. The amount of money that each family member gives to the new couple is up to them, and the quantity is written down in a notebook. The logic behind these transactions is that in the future, it is expected that this new couple will pay back the same amount of money when requested. Although this system of family support is based on the ideas of reciprocity<sup>6</sup> and the insertion of the new couple into a set of new family and friendship relations, Yalaltecas complain about their lack of power to make their own life decisions and about their subordinated position within their own families. When I asked why it is so important for some families to marry their daughters within the practice of arranged marriage, I found that families do so 'to give their daughters a family'. Within this system of moral, economic, and cultural values, young women 'gain' a family and are integrated within a network of families.

As I have argued, Yalaltecas see things changing in Yalálag, however, a few women are still denied the right to make their own decisions. Over the past 50 years, migration has intersected with changes to gender concepts as it relates to women's inclusion in the migration process and transformations in marriage practices. Since the 1950s, Yalaltecas have opposed and openly criticized the practice of arranged marriage. Between 1980 and 1990, many Yalaltec teen-aged girls and young women arrived in Los Angeles by marrying immigrant men. Currently, all immigrant women

I talked to celebrate the fact that their daughters were not born in Yalálag, which means they do not have to comply with this tradition. However, despite women's opposition, a few immigrant men continue to ask their parents or relatives via telephone to look for a wife in the town in Mexico. Once the wife or potential candidates are selected, the immigrant man returns to Yalálag and chooses his spouse. Usually, he pays for the wedding celebration and for a smuggler to bring her to the United States. In Yalálag, there is still constant and heavy emigration by young men. Consequently, some young women in Yalálag are either 'available' for marriage or left out of the marriage market (cf. Brettell 2003).

Marriage practices have not changed in an even manner or in one single direction. Yalaltecas between the ages of 50 and 70 do not talk about love as a factor for marriage. Instead, they talk about being forced to marry a man. In the first half of the twentieth century, families believed that in a new marriage, love would come with the passing of time. It was not necessary to get to know or date your spouse before marriage. Nowadays, Yalaltec men and women have incorporated the idea of romantic love as a main element in marriage. Also, dating and courtship have become part of the long-term ideal of a married relationship. The more men and women know each other before marriage, the more they feel they have a relationship based on love, closeness, and friendship. One example of this ideal is the relationship of two grandchildren of *Braceros* who married in Yalálag in 2004. They grew up together in Yalálag, but dated in Oaxaca City when they went there to attend high school. There, they decided to marry. While the young man went to Los Angeles to make money for the wedding and build a house in Yalálag, he and his girlfriend made the arrangements for the wedding with his family and the bride's family. During the wedding, no sale of food occurred in the bride's family because the bride and the groom disagree with this tradition. The groom paid for both the fiesta that took place in the bride's home and the wedding ceremony that happened at his parents' house. The groom and bride decided together to migrate to Los Ange-

<sup>6</sup> This system is known among Zapotecs as *Guelaguetza* (Aquino Moreschi 2002; Cohen 2004; Cruz-Manjarrez 2006; Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Stephen 2007).

les. Currently, this couple is raising two U.S.-born children. Working in Yalálag, Gutiérrez Najera (2007) describes how a few local women escaped from home when their parents denied them the right to wed men of their choice. Her analysis of gender and migration also shows that immigrant women who fall in love with local men return to Yalálag to marry them without family intervention, 'set the terms of the bride price' (2007: 253) themselves, and cover the cost of the wedding ceremony and migration of their spouses.

In Yalálag, in previous times, divorce did not exist. Women had to endure their marriages and be loyal to their husbands and families. At present, in Los Angeles, some immigrant women divorce or separate for various reasons: domestic violence, the husband's alcoholism, a lack of economic support from the husband, polygamy, and a lack of communication and love. During my interviews, some mothers said to me that they have a better relationship with their children following divorce. They value the fact that their children pushed them to leave their fathers, especially if the man left them for another woman or hit them while intoxicated. Divorced women told me that they have become the main providers for their children after divorce. Some divorced women described that they found support from other women who experienced similar situations. Some of them say that it has been difficult to think of another relationship because they see men as betrayers. Other women said that if they found another man who fits their emotional needs, they would like to marry again.

Yalaltecos state that divorce is possible for immigrant women because they are away from their families and community and because U.S. law allows them to do so. Unlike non-immigrant women, immigrant women have the option of divorce instead of remaining in an unhappy and troubled marriage. For immigrant women, divorce may be experienced as emotionally stressful and financially risky, but their experience of migration and of being the main providers for their families in Yalálag and in Los Angeles made them see their future as being under control. Being a single mother or woman is experienced by Yalaltecas in the U.S. as a posi-

tive option. Following divorce, some women have remarried. Of six divorced women I met, two remarried outside of their group, while one remarried within her group. These women continue to socialise with their families and provide financial help for their sisters, friends, or cousins in Yalálag to immigrate to Los Angeles if the latter are experiencing any kind of domestic violence.

### Conclusions

In this article, I examined how, why, and when, over the last 50 years, Yalalteco women have participated in the international process of migration. Furthermore, I analysed how migration has intersected with changes in gender ideology as it relates to family, marriage, and ethnic community across time and space. I showed that Yalalteco men initiated the migration process in the mid-1940s when they went to work as agricultural workers in Northern California. Yalaltecas became involved in this migration stream in the late 1960s as teenaged girls, single women, and wives. They began to migrate from Yalálag to Los Angeles, and then from different regions within Mexico to Los Angeles through family and friendship networks. Since then, Yalaltecas have worked in low-paid jobs such as domestic work, childcare, and the manufacturing industry. Despite Yalaltecas' restricted socio-economic mobility, they have financed their children and younger siblings' education in Los Angeles and in Mexico. Also, many own property in Yalálag or Oaxaca City, and some in Los Angeles.

In the migration context, Yalaltecas have circumvented patriarchal structures within their families and community. As the control exerted over them by their parents and community has lessened through their presence in the U.S., they have had to learn to negotiate gender roles and expectations with their husbands in the host country or with their male relatives in Yalálag. Additionally, as Yalaltecas abroad have gained more participation in family decision-making, they have acquired equal status with men within their family networks. Yet, while Yalaltecas have achieved more participation in the religious, economic, and political structures in the Yalálag Zapotec community in Los Angeles, non-immi-

grant women in Yalálag have been gradually integrated in these social and political spaces.

In Los Angeles, Yalalteco women have been able to articulate and realise a sense of liberation. As I have argued, immigrant women have more control over their lives and desires. They have a say in their marital decisions and enjoy more egalitarian marriages. Over the past five decades, Yalalteco immigrants have moved toward a more western-oriented direction in marriage. The fact that second-generation Yalaltecos are not marrying within the practice of arranged marriage shows a complete change in marital practices, gender ideology, the life cycle for women, and the place of women within their families, marriages, and community, both locally in Los Angeles and transnationally in Yalálag. In this context, it is important to note two things. First, Yalaltecos across three generations and two localities have manifested their opposition to the system of arranged marriage. Second, although a shift in marriage customs is taking place in both Yalálag and Los Angeles, in Los Angeles, a few immigrant men and some families continue to be in favour of the practice of arranged marriage. This fact demonstrates, on the one hand, how gender continues to be embedded within unequal power relations (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003) between Yalalteco men and women. On the other hand, it shows how the Yalálag community and families are going through a process of change in gender culture and community values. As in other immigrant communities (Charseley 2010; Zaidi and Shuraydi 2002), Yalalteco women and men in the migration context have developed a more individualistic idea about love marriages without breaking the community boundaries. Change in gender roles is still taking place within the transnational Yalálag Zapotec community in both Yalálag and Los Angeles, and immigrant men are beginning to marry second-generation Yalaltecos. Yalalteco immigrant women in the United States have changed, and they encourage and help non-immigrant women to immigrate when the latter experience any kind of domestic violence. Immigrant women continue to challenge traditional views of gender relations and ideology, as Juanita, a 70-year-old woman, told me in Yalálag:

Here [in Yalálag], there have been quite a few changes for women. Many years ago, the machismo was terrible. Now things have changed a lot. Before, men used to beat up women, and I say to you, I am happy that today our girls go to school, get a degree, and have their own money... Furthermore, the roads are open and we have public transportation. Currently, if a man beats his wife, she takes a bus and leaves. In my time, we could not. We did not know how to write and read... there were no roads. Women were not protected. If I went to ask for help from my parents because my husband beat me, they said, 'Go back to your husband, take care of him, that's your duty.' Our parents forced us to marry. But today, young girls choose their husbands. In Los Angeles, women have their own houses and money. They are the main providers for their children and mothers and leave their husbands if necessary. Migration emancipated immigrant women.

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# Practising Fractal Shi'i Identities through Muharram Rituals in Mumbai

By Reza MASOUDI NEJAD

## Abstract

This article explains the Shi'a-Muslims in Mumbai as a fractal society, a social organisation constituted of numerous social segments, each with its own shape and structure. As a result, this article refers to Shi'i *identities*, not one single Shi'i *identity*. In particular, the discussion explores how the fractal organisation of Shi'a society and diverse Shi'i identities are practised through Muharram rituals. This paper shows that each Shi'a community has invented and reinvented its identity over time through Muharram rituals, and that Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city has intensified the need for the reinvention of identities.

The idea for this paper was conceived at the beginning of my fieldwork in Mumbai in 2009, when I was faced with a tsunami of names of different Shi'a-Muslim communities. Most of my early interviews were saturated with discussions about distinct Shi'a communities. Among Shi'as in Mumbai, the religious diversity is multiplied by ethnic diversity, with the Shi'a community including groups such as the Khojas, the Daowdi Bohras, the Iranians (known as Moghuls), Hindustani Shi'as, and the Baluchis. The full picture of this diversity can be perceived only by taking into account the fact that the Khojas divided into the Ithna-Asharis and Nizari Isma'ilis,<sup>1</sup> and the fact that the Bohras are Isma'ili but follow the school of Musta'ali Isma'ili. In India, all of these groups are usually regarded simply as the Shi'a community. However, as each group insists on its own distinct identity, Shi'as appear to be a fractal society rather than a solid and integrated community.

The notion of *fractal* is borrowed from *fractal geometry*, which studies complex geometrical forms that consist of an endless number of parts.

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<sup>1</sup> There are two schools of Ismailis in religious terms - Nazari and Musta'ali.

A fractal shape can be split into parts whose own shape is similar to the whole (e.g. see Batty 1985; 2005). In this specific context, fractal society refers to a social organisation constituted based on numerous social segments, each of which has its own shape and structure. While a fractal society is envisaged as a solid and integrated social group from the outsider's point of view, each of the groups in such a society has its own organisation and insists on its own independent identity. The benefit of using the term 'fractal society' is that it allows one to consider the identity of each group without rejecting the macro image by which a fractal society is commonly perceived. The idea is to accept the macro image of a fractal society without reducing the social reality to such an overall image.

This article focuses on the Muharram rituals among Shi'i groups in Mumbai so as to delineate the diverse Shi'i identities in the city. The rituals are the most important Shi'i practice, aimed at commemorating the tragic martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, in the seventh century. The dynamics of the Muharram rituals in Mumbai have mainly been studied by examining British colonial policies and

the Hindu-Muslim conflict (see Edwardes 1912 and 1923; Kidambi 2007; Masselos 1982). The interactions among Shi'a communities in Mumbai have so far not been significantly explored. Thus this article emphasises a shift from political attention to anthropological attention in studying religious ritual as constitutive of changing social identities. The article argues that although there is some degree of cohesion between the Shi'a communities, the assortment of diverse ethnicities and Shi'i schools/sects constitutes a fractal social system.

The interaction and dispute among Shi'i groups in Mumbai have led to different ways of commemorating the tragedy of Hussein's death. There are few, if any, cities in the world where we can discover as many sects of Shi'a as in Mumbai. Mumbai appears to be an interesting case study not only due to such diversity, but also due to the fact that this cosmopolitan city was historically the cause of new policies that some Shi'a communities now follow to distinguish their identity from others.

This article begins by briefly introducing the Sunni-Shi'a division, the background of Muharram rituals in Mumbai, and Shi'a communities in Mumbai today. As it is rather difficult to explore all the Shi'i communities in Mumbai in a single paper, this article focuses on four communities: the Khoja Nizari Isma'ilis, the Bohras, the Hindustani Shi'a from Uttar Pradesh, and Iranian Shi'a, and explains how each of these groups follows certain ritual policies or techniques to practise its own identity.

### **The Sunni-Shi'a division and the tragedy of Ashura**

The first half of the seventh century was a time of political struggle and dispute over the legitimate successor of the prophet Mohammad (d. 632) and the early Caliphs. Kasravi (1944) mentions that the Sunni-Shi'a division emerged in particular due to the dispute over the successor of Ali, the fourth Caliph. Ali, like the second and third Caliphs, was assassinated; then Mu'awiyah, who was the governor of Syria and had revolted against Ali, came to power and established the Umayyad Caliphs (r. 662-750). Ayoub (1987), like

other devout Shi'a scholars, argues that after the death of Mu'awiyah, his son Yazid succeeded him by hereditary appointment in 680 rather than by election or popularity. Consequently, Muslim society was divided into two main parts: supporters of Ali's family, as the Shi'at al-Ali -- meaning the party of Ali -- or the Mu'awiyah family, as Sunni. The dispute over the legitimacy of Umayyad and Yazid's authority led to a tragic battle on Ashura day -- the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month of Muharram -- in Karbala (in modern Iraq) in 680, when Hussein, the second son of Ali and grandson of the prophet, and a small number of his companions were martyred.

Although the division of Muslims into Sunni and Shi'i parts occurred prior to the tragedy of Ashura, this event has particularly well established the division. From the Shi'i point of view, the tragedy of Karbala is more than a historic battle that took place over a political dispute and transcended into 'meta-history' (Chelkowski 1988, 263). The memory of the tragedy has profoundly influenced Shi'i thought and identity to such a degree that Michael Fischer has called it *the Karbala paradigm*. He states that the tragedy 'provides a way of clearly demarcating Shi'ite understanding from the Sunni understanding of Islam and Islamic history' (1980, 21).

Tabatabaei (1988, 85) notes that the Shi'i doctrine of *imamat* differentiates Shi'i and Sunni sects. Shi'as argue that the Muslim community should be led by a religious leader, known as an *imam*, rather than a caliph. These *imams* are the descendants of the prophet Mohammad by his daughter, Fatemah, and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. However, disputes over identifying *imam* among the prophet's descendants subdivided the Shi'a into the sects of Ithna-Ashari, Isma'ili, Zaidi, and Alavi.<sup>2</sup> For example, the Zaidis divided from the mainstream of the Shi'i school over identifying the 5<sup>th</sup> *imam*, and the Isma'ilis branched over disagreement about the 7<sup>th</sup> *imam*. In fact, it is a never-ending story, since each sect has been divided into sub-sects throughout his-

<sup>2</sup> Ithna-Asharis (or twelvers) are currently the majority of Shi'as. They recognise twelve *imams*. For an extensive discussion on this subject, see Halm (1991), and Momen (1985).

tory. Apart from all these differences between Shi'i sects, the Ashura tragedy and its commemoration have played a key role in constituting all Shi'i schools of thought.

The commemorative rituals of Ashura originated in the Arab environment in Iraq, influenced by the Buyid dynasty (ca. tenth-eleventh century) in Iran and Iraq and the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt. Shi'i culture and rituals were mainly developed in Iran during the Safavid era (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries), and spread throughout the Indian subcontinent (Calmard 1996). As Howarth (2005) notes, Safavids not only initiated the most flourishing Shi'i cultural era in Iran, but were also one of the primary forces in spreading the Shi'i faith to India.

### **The background of Shi'as and Muharram rituals in Mumbai**

Although Marathi nationalists claim that the history of Mumbai stretches back a long time, Mumbai, as it is today, was mainly shaped in the late eighteenth and particularly the nineteenth centuries. Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city has been shaped by being the destination of immigrants from all over India and beyond throughout the last two centuries. During the nineteenth century, the Shi'a communities of Mumbai were mainly composed of traders from Iran and Gujarat, including Khojas and Bohras. However, this demographic make-up drastically changed during the twentieth century, particularly with major Shi'a immigration from Uttar Pradesh (UP). The history of Shi'as in UP dates back to the eighteenth century. Lucknow, the capital of UP, is still a major Shi'i city in India today.

Muharram rituals associated with Shi'a communities in the Middle East and commemorating Ashura signify the division of Shi'a from Sunni communities. However, Muharram rituals metamorphosed into non-Shi'i rituals in India. As Kidambi (2007) remarks, even Hindus participated in the rituals in Mumbai during the nineteenth century. In fact, observing Ashura day was an inter-community/inter-religion event and the procession on Ashura day was the greatest festival of Mumbai during the nineteenth century,

often called the *taboot* procession.<sup>3</sup> Birdwood (1915) described the procession as the most picturesque event of South Asia.

The Muharram rituals in Mumbai have radically changed since the nineteenth century. The commemorative act as an inter-communal festival came to an end with the riot of 1893. Edwardes, the Commissioner of Police of Bombay at the time, argued that the riot of 1893 broke out as a result of the Hindu Nationalist movement led by Tilak. The movement was initially anti-British, but Tilak widened his movement against Muslims as well (Edwardes 1923, 104–105). Violence between Muslims and Hindus during the month of Muharram became so frequent in the following years that colonial authorities put tight regulations in place regarding the Muharram rituals. The regulation imposed in 1912, during Edwardes' era, was particularly important in transforming the Ashura commemoration in Mumbai. This regulation banned the issuing of licences for non-Muslims who wished to carry out the procession (Anon. 1912, 5). In reality, the regulation (1912) indirectly stopped the procession and was part of the process that gradually made the commemoration a solely Shi'i ritual in Mumbai. Although the Ashura commemoration is still known as the Muslims' (both Shi'a and Sunni) ritual in Indian cities, it is mainly a Shi'i ritual in Mumbai.<sup>4</sup>

This brief background of Muharram rituals in Mumbai provides a narrative of the macro dynamics of the rituals over the time. This narrative is based on the colonial policies, interaction between Hindus and Muslims or Shi'as and Sunnis, and the perception of Shi'as as a solid community. This approach captures the dynamics of the rituals at large. Much attention has been paid in the media as well as in academia to the interaction between Hindus and Muslims mainly because of the consequences of the

<sup>3</sup> *Taboot*, also written *tabut*, means coffin. The procession was named after *taboot* since people carried symbolic coffins of Karbala martyrs throughout the procession.

<sup>4</sup> Arguably, Dahrawi is an exceptional area in Mumbai, where the procession of Ashura day is dominated by Sunnis.

India-Pakistan partitioning (in the 1940s) and the breaking out of violence over the Babari Masjid incident in the early 1990s. This has led to internal interactions among Shi'as being neglected. In other words, the interaction among Shi'as is overshadowed by the tension between Hindus and Muslims. However, there was almost no discussion during my fieldwork interviews about Hindu-Muslim tensions or the effect of the violence in the 1990s on Muharram processions in Mumbai. Instead, interviewees widely addressed how each Shi'a community practises its own distinct identity through the rituals. This particularly points to the importance of paying attention to the interactions among the Shi'a communities. Notably, the next subject most frequently addressed by interviewees was the recent tension between Shi'a communities and the rising Wahhabi-Sunni population in Mumbai.

### **The Shi'a communities of Mumbai today**

Nineteenth-century Mumbai was mainly divided into two parts, the Fort and the native town. Shi'a communities mainly established their community places in the northeast part of the native town, known as Ward B (today called Dongri), also often referred to as Bendhi Bazaar. Although the Shi'i population was concentrated in Dongri, they gradually scattered all over greater Mumbai. Currently, apart from Dongri the Shi'as are scattered in Bandra, Mira Rd, Malard, Korla, Govandi, and up to Jogeshwari, Andheri, and Mumbra. Dongri is no longer the main Shi'i settlement; Lotus Colony in Govandi and even Mumbra, where Shi'as from UP mainly settle, appear to be more important than Dongri in terms of the Shi'i population today.<sup>5</sup>

The Shi'as practise Muharram rituals in all aforementioned areas; however, Dongri remains the centre for Muharram rituals. When I asked about the reason for this, Baqir Balaghi stated that 'Bendhi Bazaar is the centre of the city; Muslims used to be here, then later gradually

scattered into the suburbs. Initially, the *julus* [procession] was carried out here and when people moved out [to the suburbs], they practise [procession] there as well, but they keep the centre at Bendhi Bazaar.' Baqir is a Shi'a originally from Kashmir and currently living in Mumbra. His father was a Shi'a clergyman who studied in Iraq and Iran; and his family moved to Mumbai during the 1990s. Baqir emphasised that 'If somebody ask you, have you seen Bombay's Ashura? That means, have you seen Ashura in Bendhi Bazaar?' (December 2009, Mumbai).

The major Shi'i places, including Khoja Ithna-Ashari Jame Masjid, Moghul Masjid, Saifee Masjid, Rowdat al-Tahera, Namazi Imambara, Shushtari Imambara, Amin Imambara, Anjuman-i Fotowat-i Yazdian, Imamiyeh Masjid and Kaiser Baug, are located within walking distance of each other in Dongri. The concentration of all these places in Dongri makes the area a ritual arena during Muharram. What particularly differentiates Dongri from the other Shi'i areas is that each area in the suburb is mainly associated with a certain Shi'a community. However, Dongri is where most of the Shi'i ethnic groups/sects have a historical connection due to their initial and most important community/religious place. Through a short walk around Dongri, you can experience the diverse cultural background of the Shi'a communities through the architecture of religious places. Moghul Masjid, arguably the oldest Shi'i building in Mumbai, is a wonderful example of Iranian Qajarid architecture. Khoja Masjid clearly addresses the pure Moghul-Islamic architecture, and manifests the division of the Khojas into two parts, Isma'ili and Ithna-Ashari. The Rowzat al-Tahera of the Bohras celebrates the Fatimid architecture of Egypt.

### **From solidarity to division: The shift of Aga Khan policies on commemorating the Ashura tragedy**

Khoja Isma'ilis have always been the main body of Nizari Isma'ilis, who follow Aga Khan, in Mumbai. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Mumbai has been a kind of capital city for Nizari Isma'ilis as their living *imams*, the Aga Khans, resided in Mumbai. However, Aga Khan III mainly stayed

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, there is no official figure about the Shi'a population, but this is a common perception about the distribution of Shi'as in Mumbai. People may talk about population numbers, but these numbers are not reliable.

in Europe since in the late 1910s, and therefore Mumbai gradually lost its significance for the Nizaris. Moreover, the population of the Khoja Isma'ili community decreased due to immigration to North America, so the community is not as present in Mumbai as before. Apart from demographic change, the intimacy of Nizaris with other Shi'a communities in Mumbai has drastically changed since the 1910s when Aga Khan III introduced a major reform both in the creed and rituals of Nizari Isma'ilis. Currently, the Khoja Isma'ilis have the least intimacy with other Shi'a communities in Mumbai; the lack of cohesion between this community and other Shi'as is particularly exhibited during Muharram. While all Shi'i places are crowded and vibrant during Muharram, Nizaris' places remain quiet since they no longer commemorate the Ashura tragedy. This sharply distinguishes Khoja Isma'ilis from the other Shi'a communities to the extent that some Shi'a fanatics in Mumbai even claim that the Nizari Isma'ilis are not Muslim. Such a claim has mainly been raised since the Aga Khan III's reform. This following section reviews the shift of the Aga Khans' policy on commemorating the Ashura tragedy since the arrival of Aga Khan I in Mumbai.

Hasan Ali Shah became the 46<sup>th</sup> Nizari *imam* in 1817 in Iran. He developed a good relationship with the Qajar court and was honoured with the royal title of Aga Khan by Fath-ali Shah of Qajar, the king of Iran. However, after the death of Fath-ali Shah, the good relationship between Aga Khan and the Qajar court was not sustained. After the failure of the Aga Khan's rebellions against the Qajars, he decided to seek refuge in India and arrived in Mumbai in 1846. Having already developed a good relationship with the British when he was in Iran, he enjoyed their support in India.<sup>6</sup>

When the Aga Khan arrived in India he had a direct connection with his wealthy followers, the Khojas. The Khojas were a Sindi and Gujarati trading group who had begun to settle in Mumbai in the nineteenth century. The social organisations

of the Khoja community, constituted over centuries, were affected by the presence Aga Khan among them, and therefore some members of the community challenged Aga Khan's authority. They basically rejected that the Khojas were Shi'a, claiming that the community had a Sunni background. The authority of the Aga Khan was challenged through a court case in Mumbai, a typical procedure during colonial times. Aga Khan, however, succeeded in establishing his authority by the hand of the Bombay High Court in 1866.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Aga Khan officially stated and legally registered the Khoja community as 'Shi'a Imami Isma'ili' (Daftary 2007, 476). As Devji (2009, x) notes, the title of Isma'ili was a kind of 'invention of tradition'; Khojas had never identified themselves with that title, and it only existed in specialised Sunni textbooks.

In order to stress the Shi'i aspect of the Khojas's faith, Aga Khan emphasised and promoted the mourning service sessions of Muharram. Masselos (1982) notes that Aga Khan held the service sessions at his house in Mumbai. He also joined the service sessions held by Shi'a Ithna-Asharis at the Iranians' Imambara in Mumbai. Aga Khan came to India from Qajarid Iran, where Muharram rituals shaped social life and public culture. In fact, Qajar kings (ca. eighteenth-twentieth centuries) used the Muharram rituals as a medium to shape, influence, and control Iranian society (e.g. see Aghaie 2005). Therefore, unsurprisingly, Aga Khan used that policy too; he promoted commemorating Muharram to fulfil his political and religious authority over the Khojas. Boivin even argues that Aga Khan introduced the Ithna-Ashari rituals to the Khojas upon his arrival in India, aiming to alter the influence of Sufi leaders (*sayyids* and *pirs*) and establish his authority (2008, 156–157).

After the short era of Aga Khan II, Aga Khan III became the Nizari Imam in 1885. During his reign, some of the Iranian Shi'a clergymen in Mumbai

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive review of this period, see Daftari (2007, 463–474).

<sup>7</sup> The 1860s judgment had a major effect on the social constitution of the Nizari Isma'ilis. As Devji (2009, xi) has mentioned, even Aga Khan III had deferred the legitimacy of his authority over the Khojas, as living *imam*, to the judgment of the Bombay High Court in the 1860s.

were actively involved in converting the Khojas to Ithna-Ashari. In that situation, the Khoja community was divided into Isma'ili and Ithna-Ashari parts, often referred to as *Bardi* (majority) and *Chori* (minority) *jamat*. The tensions between the two *jamats* (communities) were especially raised when the Ithna-Ashari part built their mosque, known as Khoja Jame Masjid, just next to the Jamat Khaneh<sup>8</sup> in Dongri. While Aga Khan I was challenged in the name of Sunnism, Shi'a Ithna-Asharis challenged the authority of Aga Khan III.

Aga Khan III also faced a major court case filed against him by members of his family in Mumbai because of a dispute over the heritage of Aga Khan I. It is often called the Haji Bibi Case in reference to the lady who led it.<sup>9</sup> In 1908 the case was ended in favour of Agha Khan III; it particularly established that 'the Nizari Khojas were distinct from the Shi'as of the Ithna-Ashari school, since the plaintiffs had claimed adherence to Twelver Shiism' (Daftary, 2007, 481). After the Haji Bibi case, Aga Khan III, who had already started a reform, actively emphasised the differentiation of his followers from the Ithna-Ashari Shi'as based on a fundamental reform in creed and ritual of the Isma'ili sect.

In 1910, Aga Khan III also discouraged his followers in Iran from joining the Ithna-Ashari Shi'as for Muharram rituals. He argued that the Nizaris had a living and present *imam* and did not need to commemorate any of their dead imams (Daftary 2007, 492). Although the forbidding of commemorating the Ashura tragedy was part of a much larger reform<sup>10</sup>, stopping the ritual was a major shift as the tragedy of Ashura plays a central role in Shi'i theology and culture. Therefore such a shift sharply delineated Nizari Isma'ilis from all other Shi'as, including Musta'ali Isma'ilis (the Bohras) in Mumbai. Nowadays, during Muharram, Khoja Jame Masjid in Dongri is crowded and vibrant; however, literally right next to the mosque, the Nazaris' Jamat Khaneh with

its beautiful clock tower is quiet and looks like an empty colonial building whose time is over.

The shift of the Aga Khans' policy on the Muharram rituals was particularly the result of the cosmopolitan context of Mumbai, where different Shi'a groups interacted and challenged each other. In such a diverse Shi'i context, the communities encountered each other and needed to constantly reinvent their identities over time. The policy shift of the Aga Khans from promoting to banning the Muharram rituals is a very good example of the need to reinvent the community identity in the rapidly changing contexts of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mumbai.

### The Bohras

The black flags at the entrance of the houses of Shi'as signify the beginning of the month of Muharram. The Bohras chose to differentiate themselves from other Shi'as by identifying the beginning of the lunar month of Muharram in a different way. The orthodox traditional community of Bohra Isma'ilis follow the traditional Egyptian lunar calendar, signifying the background of Isma'ilism among the Fatimid dynasty in Egypt. The dynasty firmly established the Isma'ili sect and significantly contributed to the development of Shi'i culture, theology, and philosophy. Based on the traditional Egyptian calendar, the beginning of the lunar month is identified differently compared to the common Arabic lunar calendar. For example, in 2010, the month of Muharram began a day earlier based on the Egyptian calendar. Therefore the Bohras and other Shi'as commemorate the day of Ashura, the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram, on different days.

Generally, the period of mourning begins from the first of Muharram until 40 days after Ashura day, known as the day of *Arba'ain*<sup>11</sup> (the 20<sup>th</sup> of the month of Safar). In other words, the commemoration is carried out over 50 days. The rituals mainly take place during the first ten days of Muharram, and are particularly intensified during the 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram. Dongri is gradually transformed within the first couple of days

<sup>8</sup> Jamat Khaneh is the community place of Nizari Isma'ilis.

<sup>9</sup> She was the cousin of Aga Khan III.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this topic, see Boivin (2008, 170).

<sup>11</sup> *Arba'ain* is an Arabic term, meaning 40th.

of Muharram into a ritual arena. The cityscape is changed using flags, banners, and particularly by *sabils* that are temporarily set up in the streets. The density of flags, banners, and *sabils* in the streets demarcate the main territory that Shi'as claim for Muharram rituals. *Sabil* means donation in Arabic, however, in Mumbai it refers to a kind of stall that varies in shape and size. A *sabil* would be a small stall where a couple of *mankas* (clay pots) offer drinking water;<sup>12</sup> it can also be a large stall where water, *sherbet*, tea, and food are served as *niaz* (donation).

The first thing that anyone would notice on a short walk around Dongri during Muharram is the transition from the Ithna-Asharis' territory into the Bohras'. The Ithna-Asharis' *sabils* are mainly covered with black textiles, as black is simply the colour of grief. However, the Bohras' *sabils* are very colourful and completely covered with flowers. This display signals the Hindu background of the Bohras and can also be perceived as a symbolic way of glorifying the status of the Karbala martyrs.



Figure 1: A Bohras' *sabil*, Dongri, Mumbai, December 2009.

The Ashura tragedy is a common historical memory around which the intimacy among all Shi'i sects would be expressed. At the same time, the inter-community relationship is weakened mainly because solidarity within each Shi'a community is stimulated during Muharram. This idea

<sup>12</sup> Water is offered in memory of Hussein and his companions, whose access to water was cut in the hot desert of Karbala.

particularly applies to the case of the Bohras. As Blank (2001, 84) explains, at no other time during the year is the Bohra community as close as during Muharram, when their identity is redefined. Muharram is the time that this hierarchical community practises its social organisation and manifests its social exclusiveness. For the Bohra community, the Muharram observance is mainly focused on *majlises*, service sessions, which are very exclusively for the members of the community. Although such exclusiveness may not be officially announced, it is clearly practised.

I did participatory observation during Muharram in 2009 and 2010 in Mumbai. During my first fieldwork, I quickly realised that it is rather difficult to attend a Bohras' *majlis*. As the community is hierarchically constituted, for an outsider to attend a *majlis* it is necessary that they be invited and accompanied by an influential member of the community. In 2009, I was not able to attend a *majlis*; after a long time spent networking, apparently I had enough privilege to be invited by Mr. Abbas Master to a *majlis* in 2010. Abbas Master is the CEO of SBUT,<sup>13</sup> responsible for the major redevelopment of the Bendhi Bazar and Bohra Mohalla.

Abbas Master called me one late night to confirm that I was invited to the *majlis* at Saifee Masjid the next day. He mentioned that I might have the privilege of meeting the highness Sayyeda Mohammed Burhanuddin, the spiritual leader of the Bohras, who would deliver his sermon at the mosque. I asked him about any necessary customs for attending the *majlis*; he replied that it is only necessary to have my head covered. He asked me to meet him at his office early in the morning as he expected a great rush before the *majlis*, which would begin around 10am. I was in Dongri very early the next morning to get a *topi*, a traditional white hat that the Bohra men wear. Arriving at the Bohra Mohalla, I realised that the whole area was changed and gated for the *majlises*.

<sup>13</sup> Saifee Burhani, Upliftment Trust.

Abbas Master later told me that the highness Sayyeda Mohammed Burhanuddin announces where he is going to deliver his Muharram sermon before Muharram and then Bohras will travel from all over the world to that place. Sayyeda addressed the *majlis* in Mumbai in 2009 and 2010 and in Tanzania in 2008. As *The Times of India* (TOI) reported, 'since the Sayyeda's speech is considered sacred for every Bohra, there is a great rush to be at his *majlis*. The attendees received their invitations after registering by e-mail. Nearly two lakh<sup>14</sup> Bohras from across the world are in town and around 32,000 get to sit in the massive mosque at a time' (Wajihuddin 2010, 7). In order to control such a large number of attendees, all roads around Saifee Masjid and Rowzat al-Taherah, in Dongri, were gated and assigned a number. People passed the gates by showing a registration card and their spot in the *majlis*.

In the company of Abbas Master, we passed through the gates and sat at Rowzat al-Taherah. Shortly after that, not only Saifee Masjid and Rowzat al-Taherah, but all the surrounding streets were packed. In fact, the official number of 32,000 only accounted for those who sat inside the mosque and Rowzat al-Taherah, not those Bohras who stood in the streets. There was literally no 'outsider' in the whole crowd, inside or outside of the two places. I was, indeed, the only outsider attendee at the *majlis*. Obviously, this *majlis* was an exclusive event; this was particularly evident as Bohras men wear white dresses and *topi*, and the women wear colourful dresses.

I came back from the *majlis* and met my local Ithna-Ashari Shi'a friends who also lived in Dongri. They were quite shocked when they heard that I had attended the *majlis*. Then I shared with them the photos that I had taken during my attendance. Their reaction was rather interesting: They told me that 'we have never seen these scenes as we are simply not allowed to go there during the Bohras' *majlis*' (based on the reaction of Habib Nasser and Ali Namazi).

<sup>14</sup> A lakh equals 100,000.



Figure 2: It was an emotional time for Bohras at Rowzat al-Tahera when their spiritual head, Sayyeda Mohammed Burhanuddin, passed by after the *majlis*, Mumbai December 2010.



Figure 3: The crowd during the Bohras' *majlis*, Mumbai, December 2010.

Bohras commemorate the Ashura tragedy solely based on *majlis*. Unlike other Shi'a communities in Mumbai, they do not run processions during Muharram. The *majlis* is essentially a congregation, it enables the community to practise and maintain solidarity among the members. However, the interaction with other social groups is

minimised when the commemoration is solely based on *majlis*, especially when it is an exclusive ritual. In contrast, the processions are spatially dispersed, thus it is all about crossing borders and boundaries in the city. The procession maximises the engagement of communities, commonly associated with some tension. In other words, Bohras' rituals are spatially organised in a way that the community can practise its solidarity and social exclusiveness, and avoid social tension; these are all social characteristics of this community.

The Bohra community, however, is not a self-segregated community. I saw many individual Bohra who attended *majlises* at Ithna-Ashari places, especially at Moghul Masjid. Ali Namazi, the manager of Moghul Masjid, said that the sermons delivered in the evenings by Molana Saheb Athar, a popular orator, attract a lot of Bohras to the mosque during Muharram. Nevertheless, this is not an organised attendance, and is based on individual preference.

Although Bohras do not engage in processions, they actively support and appreciate the processions of the Ithna-Asharis to show their intimacy with them. The Saifee Ambulance Service, associated with Bohras, can be seen everywhere throughout the procession route in order to give medical services to those who practise flagellation throughout the processions. Moreover, when processions pass Bohra locales, they enthusiastically support the procession by serving food and drink. In the landscape of Muharram commemoration, the Bohras practise a strong internal solidarity at the same time that they keep a degree of intimacy with other Shi'a communities in Mumbai.

### **The Iranian community: Practising their own distinct identity**

Iranians arguably were one of the first Shi'i communities in Mumbai. They were never a significant Shi'a community in terms of population size, but they have always been an influential one. This influence is partly based on the role of Iranians in spreading the Shi'i faith in India through Isma'ili missionaries, even before the Safavid Shi'i dynasty. Shi'i Islam in India has always been

associated with Iran. For example, in describing the Shi'i faith in the *Gazetteer of Bombay*, it was noted that Shi'as follow 12 *imams* instead of Caliphs, and they 'claim that their *mujtaheds* or religious superiors in Persia have power to alter the spiritual and temporal law' (Edwardes 1909, 2:171).

The influence of the Iranian community among Shi'i communities in Mumbai is three-fold: first, the Iranian community had a historical role in spreading Shi'a Islam into India, which is not the main subject of this paper. Second, the Iranian community was a major contributor to the establishment of religious places in Mumbai. Lastly, the community played a crucial role in keeping and reviving the Muharram rituals in Mumbai.

The oral history of the Iranian community relates that the earliest group of Iranians arrived in Mumbai during the first half of the nineteenth century. These were influential traders who mainly came from the southern cities of Shiraz and Lar. These traders were major contributors to the building of religious places in Mumbai. The majority of the Shi'i places in Dongri were established by and named after these traders. A famous trader, Haj Mohammad Hussein Shirazi, built the Iranian Mosque, often called Moghul Masjid, in the 1860s. This is arguably the most important and oldest major Shi'i place in the city. The Shushtari and Amin<sup>15</sup> *imambaras* are other well-known Shi'i places in Dongri established by Iranian traders during the late nineteenth century.

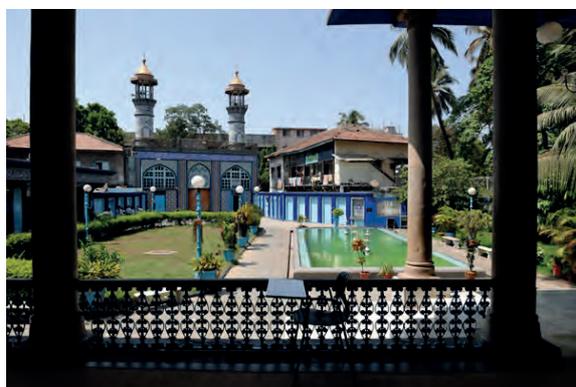


Figure 4: Iranian Mosque, often known as Moghul Masjid, Mumbai, April 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Named after its founder, Haji Zain al-Abdin-e Amin al-Tojar Shirazi.

The elite traders joined with a group of sailors from the port city of Bushehr in the south of Iran. Although this group is not noted in historical documents and studies, its current members still live in Mumbai, especially in the Dongri area. From their hometown, they brought specific Muharram rituals to Mumbai. The community still performs on *damam*, a traditional drum played in the port city of Bushehr, during Muharram through processions in Dongri. Another ritual that they brought to Mumbai and still practise is called 'Bushehri Matam', interestingly practised by Hindustani Shi'as and not the Iranians. Firoz Shakir (interviewed November & December 2009) has talked about practising the ritual of Bushehri Matam in Bandra East. Bushehri Matam simply means 'lament' in the way of the people of Bushehr. In fact, Bushehri Matam is a ritual that is called *haya-mola* in Bushehr. Mr. Mohammadali-Pour (interviewed in Tehran, April, 2006), Mr. M. Gerashi (interviewed in Bushehr, April, 2006), and Dr. Hamidi (interviewed in Tehran April, 2006) explained the ritual of *haya-mola* to me. In this ritual, participants rhythmically beat their chests while walking in concentric circles. Each participant takes the belt of the person next to him in one hand, and beats his chest with the other hand. Participants move in circles centred around a singer who sings an emotional dirge in the memory of the Karbala tragedy.



Figure 5: Members of the Iranian diaspora from Bushehr play *damam* in Imambara Rd, Mumbai, December 2010.

The early Iranian residents in Mumbai mainly came from the southern provinces of Iran during the nineteenth century. However, another group

of migrants from the central part of Iran came to Mumbai during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were mainly peasants from small towns and villages around the cities of Yazd and Kerman, who were in exodus because of a great famine during World War I in Iran. In a short time this group was able to become financially well-established by operating catering businesses and establishing famous Irani restaurants in Mumbai. This community established another Shi'i centre, Anjuman-i Fotowat Yazdian (est. 1930), which is currently a prominent place for Shi'i rituals. Most of the descendants of the early elite traders left Mumbai, and the Iranian community became very small and dominated by Iranians who came from Yazd. The population of the community is now only a few thousand; however they remain a very influential community that manages and operates most of the Shi'i places in Dongri, in the south of Mumbai.

I asked Habib Nasser why Iranians are a very influential and well respected community in Mumbai. Habib, 37, whose father migrated to Mumbai from Bahrain during colonial times, said that 'all big places for Shi'as are built by Iranians, even the Rahmatabad cemetery was made by the Iranian people, which is the only cemetery for Shi'a Muslims in Mumbai.' Habib's father was a patron of the Muharram rituals in Mumbai and Habib himself is the founder of an *anjuman* (association) in Dongri. Habib stated that 'we are privileged to use [the cemetery] by the grace of the Iranian people. It is in fact, I can say, I am a son of Iranian people who allow us [to be] buried in that cemetery, because we don't have any other cemetery' (interviewed in Mumbai, December 2009).

As already mentioned, the procession of Ashura was stopped in Bombay during the early twentieth century, and it was mainly the Iranian community who kept the Muharram commemoration based on *majlises* (services sessions). The community organised *majlises* in Shushtari, Amin, and Namazi Imambaras, as well as in Moghul Masjid. All these places are located in Dongri, where the community used to be concentrated. Sayyed Safar-Ali Hussini narrated a vivid picture of Muharram rituals during that period. S. Safar-

Ali, born in Mumbai, is the senior member of the Hussini family, an influential family that served as patrons for the Muharram rituals in Mumbai for generations. The family owns Lucky Hotels and restaurants in Mumbai. S. Safar-Ali (interviewed April and December 2010) mentioned that the British were nice to the Iranians and gave them permission for rituals in the *imambaras*, but the procession through the streets was not allowed. Therefore during the 1930s the Iranians had a silent procession moving between the Namazi, Shushtari, and Amin Imambaras, where they held service sessions. Supporting S. Safar-Ali's narration, *The Times of India* (TOI) reports that

The Moghuls celebrated their Katal-ki-Bat at the Nemazee'a Imambara in Paxmodia Street and at the Shustry 's Imambara<sup>16</sup> and owing to insufficient space half the crowd could not participate in the ceremonies and had to stand up on the road outside the gate. The ceremonies...and finished within half an hour, after which the participants proceeded to the Zainul Abedin's Imambara<sup>17</sup> at Jail Road, protect' (Anon. 1930, 10)

S. Safar-Ali stated that Iranians gradually changed the silent procession into a more typical procession. A short report by TOI (Anon. 1945, 9) also notes the procession of the Iranians. S. Safar-Ali Hussaini and Dr. Jafar Najafi (both interviewed in April 2010) noted that the very early Iranian procession was started from Namazi Imambara, came to the Shushtari Imambara, then passed by Moghul Masjid and terminated at Amin Imambara (figure 6). They mentioned that this procession was small and limited to the Iranian community.

Although the Muslim and Shi'i population decreased in Bombay after the independence of India, the population expanded again because of immigration from Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, and Bihar. S. Safar-Ali (interviewed, April, 2010) pointed out that this happened particularly after the abolition of Zamindari (landlordism) in India in the 1960s, when many Shi'a *navabs* and *zamindars* came to Bombay from Lucknow. *Navabs* and *zamindars* were influential social classes

<sup>16</sup> Shushtari Imambara.

<sup>17</sup> Zainul Abedin's Imambara is also known as Amin Imambara.

that owned or leased and managed agricultural lands. As many interviewees explained, when the Shi'i population increased and they gained confidence, the Iranians' procession became the core driver of expansion for the Muharram processions during the 1960s and 1970s in the south of Mumbai. While Iranians initiated the procession in the south of Bombay in Dongri, it was mainly other Ithna-Ashari Shi'as who expanded the procession. S. Safar-Ali Hussini, Jafar Najafi, Habib Nasser, Fairoz Shorki, and Zahir Abbas<sup>18</sup> emphasised that the processions expanded based on or around the initial Iranian procession or places; however, Iranians do not participate in the expanded procession, preferring to stage their own shorter processions, thus emphasising their own distinct identity. In other words, Iranians both integrated with other Shi'as at the same time as they practised their identity.



Figure 6: The route of major Shi'i processions in the south of Mumbai; the route of the Iranian procession is shown by the solid-line. (1) Mehfil-e Abol-Fazle Abbass, (2) Namazi Imambara, (3) Shushtari Imambara, (4) Iranian Masjid, (5) Amin Imambara, (6) Anjuman-I Fotowat, (7) Rahmat-abad Cemetery.

<sup>18</sup> He is the manager of WIN TV (World Islamic Network), interviewed in December 2009 in their small office, opposite to Khoja Masjid, Mumbai.

The Iranian group also represents its separate identity in other ways. Fiaroz Shukri, a Hindustani Shi'a, emphasised that Hindustani Shi'as fast on Ashura day until 7pm. Irani Shi'as also fast, but only until 12pm (noon). The fasting on the day of Ashura is called *Fakhe Shikani (Fa'he Shi'kani)*. It is rather difficult to find out how many people participate in *Fakhe Shikani*. In fact, during my participatory observations, I did not come across anyone who was fasting on Ashura day, especially as food and drink were being served everywhere on this day. Nevertheless, many interviewees continually echoed Fiaroz's point that Iranians distinguish themselves from other Shi'as through fasting.

### Hindustani Shi'as from Utter Pradesh

Shi'i rituals have developed throughout history across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Indian Shi'as, like other Shi'as, localised the rituals and have developed their very own symbols; the most noticeable Indian symbol is the *ta'zyeh*, the replica of Hussein's dome in the city of Karbala. As the Shi'i rituals were developed in different linguistic territories, some terms or names may have different meanings across Shi'i communities. The Arabic term *ta'zyeh* literally means mourning, so it refers to the mourning ceremonies among Arab-speaking Shi'a communities. In Iran, *ta'zyeh* refers to the passion play of Ashura by which a part of the Karbala tragedy is performed. However, the *ta'zyeh* is the symbolic dome of Hussein, which is carried through Muharram processions in India.

The *ta'zyeh* used to be commonly carried through the procession of Ashura in Mumbai during the nineteenth century; a photograph of the Muharram procession, depicting Muharram during the late nineteenth century, shows that the *ta'zyeh* was carried in Mumbai. According to several newspaper reports, the nineteenth-century procession in Mumbai was towards Moody Bandar (Moody quay) where all the *ta'zyehs* were immersed (e.g. see Anon. 1886, 3; Anon. 1888, 5). However, when Iranians revived the Muharram procession after it had been interrupted for a few decades, the processions had a new format:

the *ta'zyeh* was no longer associated with the processions. Moreover, when the main Mumbai procession in Dongri was established during the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was towards the Rahmatabad cemetery in Mazgan and not a sea-front (figure 6). Therefore, unlike other Indian cities, the *ta'zyehs* are not carried throughout the main processions in Mumbai. This description is about the ritual in Dongri, known as the heart of Mumbai's Muharram rituals. However, in some areas like Mumbra or Govandi, the *ta'zyehs* are built and carried in local processions, identifying the Hindustani Shi'a communities that are mainly from UP. It is difficult to define the Hindustani Shi'as in Mumbai, however, Hindustani Shi'as are those who are not Khojas, Bohras, or Iranians. This group is mainly from UP and is not as financially well-established as the other three communities. However, it is also rather difficult to simply limit the idea of Hindustani Shi'as to being lower-class Shi'as.



Figure 7: Taboot Procession, Bombay, late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

A major fraction of the current Shi'i population in Mumbai came from UP. Those who came during the 1960s or 1970s do not emphasize their place of origin. Interestingly, however, those Shi'as who recently arrived emphasize that they are from UP and brought the *ta'zyeh* back to some localities in Mumbai. The *ta'zyeh* is carried through the Shi'i procession in some suburbs of Mumbai, e.g. in Govandi and Mumbra. I interviewed Sayyed Baghir Razavi about the Muharram procession in Mumbra. He is a Shi'a clergyman educated in Iran, originally from Lucknow, and moved to Mumbra

about 15 years ago. He is currently the *imam-i jamat*<sup>19</sup> of Shi'as in Mumbra. He mentioned that 'as people are mostly from UP, they are carrying the *ta'zyeh* through the procession which is towards Rati Bandar where they immerse the symbolic dome every year' (interview in December 2009, Mumbra, Mumbai). Razavi also explained that in UP, wherever there is no sea-front, people would carry the *ta'zyeh* towards a cemetery and bury it in an open field next to the cemetery, often called 'Karbala'. In fact, that is the action carried out during the Muharram ritual in Lotus Colony in Govandi. Ershad Hussein, who is the trustee of the Ajuman of Lotus Colony (est. 1968), explained that the *ta'zyehs* are carried through procession and buried in Govandi; then some people go to Dongri to participate in the main procession (Interviewed December 2009, Govandi, Mumbai).



Figure 8: The *ta'zyehs* in Lotus Colony, Govandi, Mumbai, December 2009.

Habib Nasser mentioned that 'the Ashura day is the *makhsus* of Dongri, which means there is no procession in Ashura afternoon in Mumbai but in Dongri' (December 2009, Mumbai). This signifies the importance of Dongri, since it is said that *Imam Hussaien* was martyred in the afternoon of Ashura day. While there are many local processions during the first days of Muharram in different localities in Mumbai, all Shi'as come to Dongri to participate in the procession of Ashura afternoon.

Shi'a Ithna-Asharis, in groups known as *anjumans*, participate in the procession of Ashura day from all over the city, including Shi'as from UP who come from Mumbra or Govandi. While these *anjumans* carry their *ta'zyehs* through local processions, they participate in the main procession in Dongri without the *ta'zyehs*. In other words, in local processions they signal their UP identity, but when it is time for the main procession they simply follow the Mumbai format of the procession. Indeed, while the Shi'as from UP keep practising their own custom and identity at the local level, they exercise and exhibit their solidarity with other Shi'a communities during the major event.



Figure 9: The procession of Ashura afternoon in the south of Mumbai, December 2009

### Conclusion

Muharram is the time when the complex and fractal organisation of Shi'a communities in Mumbai is revealed. The Muharram rituals have always been a means by which diverse Shi'i identities are not only defined and practised but also invented and reinvented. This paper shows that there is no one Shi'i *identity* but that there are multiple Shi'i *identities*; moreover, these identities have never been a fixed idea and are constantly evolving. In fact, Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city has intensified the need for the reinvention of identities. The Muharram rituals became crucial for this process of reinvention of identities, while the constitution of Muharram rituals also simultaneously metamorphosed over time. The interaction between diverse Shi's communities, particularly during the twentieth century, has

<sup>19</sup> The person who leads the prayer at the mosque.

been the main force shaping the constitution of Muharram rituals in Mumbai. It does not mean that Shi'a-Sunni and Muslim-Hindu encounters were not important, but I would like to argue that the internal interactions among Shi'as has been more important than past consideration of this area has noted.

This article shows that overemphasising the political reading of social dynamics leads to simplifying social encounters. In a cosmopolitan city like Mumbai, it is necessary to recognise the complex relations that constitute a fractal society. The rituals are not passive mediums that represent social relations, but rather actively constitute and reconstitute the social relations. The time and space of rituals are the landscape in which social encounters are intensified; it is an opportunity to capture complex social relations much more easily than in an everyday setting.

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