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Redrawing the boundary of “speech community”: how and why the historicity and materiality of language and the space/place distinction matter to its reconceptualization

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Abstract: This essay contemplates how we adapt existing sociolinguistic theoretical concepts, methodologies, and analytical units to the world we live in today. Regardless of one’s location on the globe, our lives are profoundly affected by increasingly intense global interconnections and, at the same time, equally intense differentiation of space attending late global capitalism and the evolving nation-state system. While sociolinguistics has attended the heterogeneity within the speech community, in the world today as such, the idea of speech community as bounded is no longer tenable. In envisioning the future direction of IJSL and its leadership in the field, this essay suggests that speech community as an analytical concept would be significantly advanced through the theoretical integration of the space/place distinction and the historicity and materiality of language into its architectonics. By drawing on some of the recent works for guiding models, the essay argues that the reconceptualization of speech community would also demand radical openness to interdisciplinary approaches.

Keywords: historicity of language; interdisciplinarity; language and materiality; space/place; speech community

Since its inauguration in 1974, the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (IJSL) has been one of the staple intellectual resources for students interested in the social organization of language and language use. One of the most notable features of IJSL that has been sustained through its entire history is its commitment to expanding sociolinguistics to include both researchers and research sites from across the globe through, for example, region- and/or country-

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based special issues regularly published in the IJSL. Such an encompassing engagement in regionally and nationally specific sociolinguistic content is both intellectually and politically important, and I would like the journal to continue to honor – and renew – this tradition, as it warrants the journal's firm commitment to striving to balance more Eurocentric knowledge and knowledge production.

Needless to say, IJSL's truly international character is not simply a matter of editorial policies. The real challenge for IJSL in particular and the field of sociolinguistics in general is how to adapt existing sociolinguistic theoretical concepts, methodologies, and analytical units to the increasingly intense global interconnections and, at the same time, to do justice to equally intense differentiation of space attending late global capitalism and the evolving nation-state system. Do analytical units such as the speech community, the region, and even the nation-state, still hold in the same way as before, when, in reality, their boundaries are increasingly more porous and permeable, even as inequalities and "local" consequences of globalization proliferate across space? How might our existing commonsense assumptions about location necessarily change were we to revisit, for example, the epistemology of "speech community" for sociolinguistic research design, methods, and analysis? For example, we see a host of rich sociolinguistic studies engaging in networked ethnography and digital/ICT mediated ethnography, which address such issues.

In order to clarify my point, I would like to draw on marxist geographer David Harvey's (1993) discussion of the distinction between place and space. Following Harvey (1993), "place" can be understood as a surface to which people have subjective ties commonly called lived experience. Memories, hopes, despair, emotions, and identities are both literally and figuratively inscribed on place. It is a surface that is "meaning-ful" for people. Sociolinguistics is at its best when it captures the dynamics and intricacies of the ways in which language plays a mediating role in sociality, for example, in the case of memory and other forms of lived experience. Sociolinguistics is at its best when it seeks to understand the role of language in such place-making, as its semiotic capacity can not only symbolically but existentially (or indexically) anchor linguistic practice in a given space.

"Space," on the other hand, is a systematic surface, and is, therefore, calculative, abstractable, and standardizable. Space is not the medium of lived experience, but the "container" for thinking about processes that transcend place. That thinking can be either analytical (for example, the distribution or environmental hazards) or practical (the cost of transport and communication across distance), and either critical (for example, organizing social movements across national borders) or repressive (plotting the war on terror).

Capitalism, as Harvey and his colleagues have argued, is inescapably a spatial process in which uneven development and other spatial relations have

fundamental rules in the production and appropriation of surplus value. The spatial effect of the capitalist machine is to produce differential – to make place in the concrete sense of fixed factories, communities of workers (and the unemployed), and arrangements of infrastructure. This suggests that space and place might be better thought of not in terms of the micro-macro scale, but as contemporaneously dialectic (Amin 2002; see also Carr and Lempert 2016). As Harvey (1993) points out, capitalist globalization unevenly moves and invests its surpluses in other locations, which then bring about new places and new place-making processes. Global logistical and transportation systems, as well as new media and telecommunication technologies, inevitably alter the temporality of lived experience (“creative destruction”) in any given place and its material conditions. The production of a new place is simultaneously the production of a new and contingent connectivity between and among places. Such connectivity, whether it is logistical, juridical, cultural, or political, makes it all the more difficult to treat a place as bounded. Here’s another example: the idea of national sovereignty is no longer an inalienable prerogative that defines an absolute boundary. For example, it is well recorded by anthropologists that many states in the Global South have pockets of places within their “sovereign” territories where trans-local institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and even NGOs provide development aid and assistance, eclipsing the institutional capacity of the receiving country. And, of course, capital’s mobility is both disruptive and opportunity-making, generating strong pressures for the migration of labor, spawning diaspora of various kinds, where people physically and affectively inhabit multiple locations. How can we, in effect, reverse-engineer complex global processes to discern location as the playing-out of the tension between place and space, and what can we learn from such insights about new ways to conceptualize the sociolinguistic research site?

What I am observing here is nothing particularly new or original, as there are abundant sociolinguistic studies relevant to these issues. For example, we see a host of rich sociolinguistic studies engaging in networked ethnography and digital/ICT mediated ethnography, all of which address such issues. What I want to suggest here is that these lessons and insights recast and productively complicate the research site both analytically and methodologically. Here I also take a cue from Lo’s (2020) critical observation that sociolinguistic studies often get thematized by the “language and X,” which would also lead to the potential ethnographic impoverishment of the research site as the speech community.

In fact, some recent work already directly engages the theoretical question of the dialectical tension between place and space. Heller and McElhinny’s (2017) *Language, Capitalism, Colonialism* traces the role of language in the social formations of capitalism and colonialism, and, by doing so, show us how distantly located places are in fact interconnected in the history of the expansive

spatialization of capitalism and empire. The book envisions an alternative historiography of language and discourse. The contributions in Duchêne and Heller's (2013) edited volume, *Language in Late Capitalism: Pride and Profit*, collectively demonstrate the extent to which the contemporary system of global production – variously termed late capitalism, the new economy, or neoliberalism – plays definitive but diverse roles in transforming local places and the linguistic practices that mediate them. The analytical discernment of the relationship between place and space also gives us new insights into how power operates and how power relations get reproduced (see, for example, Martin Rojo and Del Percio 2020). It is also important to note that all the works mentioned also work through the critique of the separation between language and materiality, or of the assumption of language as immaterial (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017). Reconceptualization of language as material practice and reconceptualization of the notion of speech community thus mutually inform each other.

Finally, I would like to highlight a couple of points as my “wish list” for IJSL as its new editors come on board. First, as discussed above, regardless of the topic, global political economy has significantly changed “speech communities.” Although it is not the only force, we cannot afford to ignore capitalism and the global state system, which touches everywhere with increasing intensity. This makes it all the more important to have a robust theoretical discussion on how to conceptualize the local and the role of language in its making. This kind of focus has additional entailments. First, the historicity of language. This does not mean a history of language as a system or its usage. What I would like to advocate for is “a history of the present,” to borrow Foucault's (1991 [1975]: 31) terms. It is not concerned with the origin of things, but with the question of how things have come to be at the present moment. A history of the present does not causally connect the present to the past. Instead, it asks under what conditions a particular object came into being, rather than other objects; it searches for the conditions of possibility for what appears to be the logical or inevitable outcome of its “history” and thus undermines the discourse that claims self-evident truths. A history of the present is a history that critiques the present moment not as inevitable or natural, but as the consequence of struggle and power relations. Rosa's (2019) *Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race* exemplifies such a genealogical analysis. Part of his book explores how the racial categories emerged in the US history of colonialism, and how they underwrote the way in which Latinx identities came to be naturalized by the emblematic indexical linkage between language and race. The historicization of indexicality thus requires a broader understanding of the socio-political condition, as it is both the ground and the means by which power operates.

Second, as IJSL is posed to lead the field into new directions, I would like to urge radical openness to interdisciplinary projects. While new approaches are

likely to appear with critical reflection on one’s own discipline, we should also seek serious engagement with theories and methods from potentially allied disciplines. We can tap into a range of disciplines in social sciences and humanities, including but not limited to cultural anthropology, geography, media studies, science and technology studies, political science, psychology, and so on. Interdisciplinary engagement should not be limited to simple “additive” gains, but can induce innovation in theory and method at the core of sociolinguistics. What have we got to lose?

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