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Transience

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1. Introduction

Much of the work that has been carried out in pragmatics, sociolinguistics and related fields has traditionally focused on sedentary and relatively stable social configurations in which social interaction is assumed to proceed on the basis of shared social and linguistic norms. Recently, however, research concerned with mobility and movement has increasingly come to the fore within sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (see e.g. Blommaert 2016, Pennycook 2016, Park 2019), and scholars interested in social settings characterized by transience have begun to explore contexts where the existence of sedimented social and linguistic norms cannot be assumed to be in place *a priori*, but must be explored as an emergent phenomenon developing *in situ* over time as a joint effort of the participants, in an interplay with the wider social context. Research interested in transient social communities, defined as “social configurations where people from diverse sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds come together (physically or otherwise) for a limited period of time around a shared activity” (Mortensen and Hazel 2017:256), serve to complexify the object of analysis within the study of language and social life. Many established theoretical constructs in pragmatics and sociolinguistics can be seen as products of past needs to construct stable models of unstable phenomena. A focus on transience challenges this need for stability and opens new avenues of research at the interface of pragmatics, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology.

2. Disciplinary triage

In the early 20th century, the study of language struggled with the problem of determining what the object of linguistics actually was. A classic instance of a language scholar's reaction to the need to provide a stable model of an unstable phenomenon is the following example discussed by Bloomfield:

A needy stranger at the door says *I'm hungry*. A child who has eaten and merely wants to put off going to bed says *I'm hungry*. Linguistics considers only those vocal features [i.e. forms] which are alike in the two utterances, and only those stimulus-reaction features [i.e. meanings] which are alike in the two utterances. (Bloomfield 1926: 154, italics in the original, our glosses in square brackets)

By today's standards, this represents an extreme case of reductionism in defining the object of study for anyone interested in language as part of social life. Yet, it was probably in many ways *necessary* for Bloomfield and his contemporaries to pursue this kind of reductionism in order to capture an object of study that could be described *at all*. The world's complexity has not necessarily grown since Bloomfield formulated his 'postulates for the science of language' in 1926, but our appetite not to reduce it has.

As Celia Roberts (2017) has pointed out, we may think of this as part of a continual historical process of disciplinary *triage*. Triage is a metaphor taken from the practical and ethical dilemma of doctors in the trenches: who is to be treated first? Two important factors to consider in answering this question is: what *has* to be done first and what *can* be done first. A similar process has arguably been at play in the study of language in social life where research questions and research priorities have changed over the years. As questions have been answered or considered sufficiently treated, new questions have arisen, often accompanied by theoretical as well as technological advances which have enabled scholars to develop new methods and new ways of seeing the world.

The interest in transience represents one such recent development. Just like mobility, transience is not a new empirical phenomenon, but it is not until recently that transience has emerged as a research object in its own right. This is in many ways not surprising. Even though transience is arguably a far more fundamental and pervasive aspect of human experience than might be assumed at first sight, it is perhaps understandable that sociolinguists and likeminded scholars have started out looking at presumably more stable contexts in their attempt to understand the role of language in social life. After all, objects that are imagined to be stable and homogeneous, such as well-defined speech communities coincident with the boundaries of nation-states, are in some ways easier to describe systematically than more ephemeral social configurations characterized by social and linguistic heterogeneity. In the early days of sociolinguistic and pragmatic research, there might also have been a sense that stable communities constituted the most *relevant* object of study, and therefore the object that needed to be tended to first. This priority mirrors the focus traditionally awarded to 'thick' as opposed to 'light' communities, as Blommaert (2018) calls them, in social theory.

Technological and methodological advances have also played a role in enabling scholars to develop research into contexts characterized by transience. Audio and video-recording have been applied in sociolinguistics for a long time, but routine access to the technology needed to study naturally occurring social interaction in transient social configurations, such as portable and relatively unobtrusive audio and (especially) videorecorders, linking software and other types of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Mortensen and Hazel 2012, Haberland and Mortensen 2016), has only recently become part of the mainstream and utilized in the development of new or renewed methodological frameworks such as linguistic ethnography (see e.g. Tusting 2019, Copland and Creese 2015).

The important point to make here is that a focus on transience does not so much allow us to identify new aspects of social reality as it allows us to see old phenomena in a new light. As Reyes (2014) has pointed out, 'as we move about the world, we may not see new things as much as see things anew—which is certainly something but an entirely different something' (2014: 367). Moreover, the recent interest in transience amongst sociolinguists may represent yet another

case of sociolinguistics being a little ‘late getting to the party’ (cf. Coupland 2003) compared to scholars from other fields, including sociology, anthropology and human geography. Although transience may not be a mainstream topic in social theory, it has in fact been identified and discussed as a salient feature of late modernity for at least 20 years, for instance in relation to transient workers in the tourism industry, from Hawai‘i to Scandinavia (Adler and Adler 1999, Thulemark 2017, Underthun and Jordhus-Lier 2018), transient ‘portable’ communities that form around shared interests in bluegrass music in the American Midwest (Gardner 2004) transient or ‘light’ communities emerging in various modes of public transport from the Victorian railway (De Sapio 2013) to ‘tram 12 in the city of Antwerp’ (Soenen 2006, cf. Nash 1975), transnational students in Auckland (Collins 2012), and ‘global nomads’ living lives of ‘location independence’ (Kannisto 2016).

3. Transience and the study of language and social life

Although it is only fairly recently that transience has begun to attract the attention of sociolinguists as an empirical phenomenon and theoretical concept of concern in its own right, several studies have in fact been reported in the literature that speak to the notion of transience, either directly or indirectly. In this section, we review some of the main issues and topics that have been addressed so far.

In a study of women’s neighborhood meetings in a transient urban setting in Indonesia, Goebel (2010a) discusses how processes of social interaction unfold in a multilingual setting where “rules for conduct cannot be taken for granted, because participants do not share the same trajectories of socialization” (2010a: 223). Drawing on Agha’s (2007) notion of ‘semiotic registers’, Goebel is able to show how the neighborhood meetings constitute a social setting with a *plurality* of emerging semiotic registers, and how a relative newcomer to the setting gradually comes to align with the dominant in-group register, adopting but also adding to the shared semiotic resources of the group. As Goebel notes, we can see this process as a case of language socialization (cf. Ochs 1988, Wortham 2005), but because the social setting is characterized by diversity and transience and relatively fleeting social relationships, the process of socialization is dialectic: The newcomer is not simply assimilating to the communicative and behavioral norms of the group, she is also affecting them in the process.

Several other studies have discussed similar cases of how transient social settings often involve processes of reciprocal or ‘mutual’ socialization. In an ethnographic case study conducted at the Danish headquarters of a multinational company, Lønsmann (2017) shows how members of an HR team experienced the addition of a transnationally mobile, English-speaking colleague to the team. The new composition of the team resulted in an ongoing re-negotiation of the norms of language choice in the group (Danish vs English), and Lønsmann argues that while the newcomer was strategically – and quite effectively – positioned as ‘a catalyst for increased use of English and for the creation of a “global mindset”’ she was at the same time also ‘socialized into the existing Danish egalitarian workplace culture’ (2017: 326).

Similarly, Mortensen (2014) shows how the norms of language choice in three student project groups at an international study programme at a Danish university have developed locally within the context of the groups. English is the dominant language in all groups, but it co-exists with Danish as the local language, resulting in the emergence of what might be considered a ‘bilingual medium’ (Gafaranga

and Torras 2001) in which the members do not on all occasions orient to Danish and English as separate codes (see Chapter 4 in Goebel 2010b for a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in relation to his study of Indonesian neighborhood talk). The interactional practices displayed by the members constitute an emergent form of social and moral order particular to each group, coterminous with its existence.

The discussion above points to an important if slight difference between what has been called transient communities (Mortensen and Fabricius 2014, Mortensen 2017) and the more well-established notion of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). A community of practice (CoP) can be defined as an “aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor” (1992: 464), drawing on ‘a shared repertoire’ of resources (Wenger 1998: 82ff). Although Wenger (1998) stresses that this shared repertoire is an emergent phenomenon, *sharedness* of resources, including linguistic resources, is nevertheless often seen as a defining feature of community of practice, just like shared norms were seen as a precondition for the existence of a speech community in the early days of sociolinguistics (cf. discussion in Rampton 2010 and Jacquemet 2019). In transient communities, this form of sharedness cannot be assumed to be in place from the outset, though it may very well emerge as a result of the interaction.

Studies on communicative practices in operating theatres in Australia and England (Gillespie et al. 2013, Bezemer et al. 2016) offer fascinating insights into problems associated with a lack of shared resources in workplaces characterized by transience. In describing their field site, an operating theatre in a major hospital in London, Bezemer and colleagues explain that “up until about 15 years ago, surgeons in this site often worked with the same group of nurses for decades, during which time they accumulated a significant body of knowledge about how colleagues work” but “they now step in and out of newly formed, transient teams as they move from one operating list to the next and frequently work with people they have not met before” (Bezemer et al. 2016: 362). In such situations, the difference between a community of practice and a transient community becomes obvious. Even though the participants have all had professional training and all speak ‘the same’ language (English), a shared set of resources – linguistic and otherwise – cannot be taken for granted. In fact, the lack of shared words for surgical instruments and processes related to the surgery at hand result in communicative challenges that the participants need to resolve in order to carry out their joint tasks. So, even though teams in operating theatres might be assumed to constitute textbook examples of communities of practice (and may well have been in the past), their status as such cannot be taken for granted. Instead, they may productively be studied as a way to explore how shared social and communicative practices develop under conditions of transience (King 2014).

The examples discussed by Bezemer et al. illustrate communicative problems that may arise in transient settings because participants do share denotational meanings of words, and how such problems can be overcome by speakers developing locally shared meanings. Similarly, in a rather different social setting, Pitzl (2018) shows how ‘a transient international group (TIG)’ consisting of four recent acquaintances in Malta gradually, over the course of three conversations, develop shared lexical norms. The participants draw on English as their dominant lingua franca but crucially also enlist additional resources from what Pitzl calls their shared ‘multilingual resource pool’ (2018: 32). As Pitzl points out, the method she employs is not limited to studies of how shared lexical repertoires develop. Indeed, in many transient settings, norms at all levels of linguistic description are in principle less fixed than in more stable social configurations. This means that studying transient social groups allows researchers to

explore processes of ‘semiotic sedimentation’ not only at the level of denotational meaning, but also at ‘higher orders of indexical meaning’ (Mortensen 2017: 275, cf. Jaffe’s (2016) notion of indexicalisation). This could entail the development of shared pragmatic norms related to politeness, e.g. norms for what it means to be late in a refugee language classroom setting (Hazel and Lønsmann *fc*), norms for what counts as (in)appropriate styles of joking (Kappa 2016: 19-21), but also the ongoing negotiation of broader language ideological frameworks, for instance concerning the relationship between English as an international language and other languages in the ‘sociolinguistic economy’ of multinational companies (Millar 2017).

Trivially, not even assumed stable situations are stable forever. Similarly, transient social configurations may be transient to different degrees and in different ways. The time span available for semiotic sedimentation to take place or for ‘common ground’ (Kecskes 2013) to materialize will differ between different types of transient configurations. In ‘one-off’ encounters of the type described by de Sapio (2013) in Victorian railway carriages, there will under normal circumstances be little time in which common ground can emerge and any pre-existing ‘core’ common ground. Nevertheless, even in fleeting tourist encounters where one can hardly speak about ‘communities’ (cf. Jaworski and Thurlow 2013, Haberland 2007), patterns and expected modes of behavior often do exist because of the familiar and script-like character of such meetings. This indicates that while all social configurations are inescapably transient, some encounters may be experienced as being more transient than others, and semiotic resources may be seen as more or less portable across different configurations, also by participants themselves.

4. Transience as a complexifying heuristic

The empirical phenomena that form the staple of much research in pragmatics and related fields – linguistic systems, social configurations, indexical links between semiotic systems and social meaning, and so on – are not stable but have an inherent transient character. Nevertheless, as we have mentioned above, there has been a historical tendency to treat many of these phenomena as if they *were* stable. However, at this point in the development of the study of language in social life, we have arguably come to the point where the pretense of stability is no longer required for analysis. We do not have to accept unproductive simplicity in defining our object of study (cf. Bloomfield 1926) in order to say anything sensible about it in the first place. The study of social interaction in transient settings serves to complexify the object of study in pragmatics and related fields, and may as such be seen as one out of several recent notions that have encouraged scholars of language and social life to reconceptualize received notions in the literature and re-view the world.

The notion of *superdiversity*, as suggested by Vertovec 2007, urges us to move beyond simplistic understandings of diversity (cf. Arnaut et al. 2016, Goebel 2018). Individuals cannot meaningfully be grouped into a neat mosaic of distinct social groups based on ethnicity, religion or language. Instead we need a multidimensional perspective that allows us to explore the ongoing ‘diversification of diversity’ in a social reality where individuals and groups differ from and resemble each other along *multiple* dimensions at the same time.

Similarly, notions such as *polylinguaging* (Jørgensen 2008), *translanguaging* (García and Li 2014, Holmen, this volume) and *metrolingualism* (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010) challenge fundamental notions about what constitutes ‘a language’ and give short shrift to the idea that multilingual productions should be analysed as concatenations of single-language segments, since features from different language

systems can appear simultaneously and overlay each other. Metrolingualism and (some versions of) translanguaging also radically expand the remit of what counts as the object of study since language is increasingly seen as co-existing with other semiotic modes and should be analysed as part of this whole rather than in isolation. A time-traveling Bloomfield would certainly be quite perplexed by the whole thing.

The study of transient settings can serve as a focalising heuristic allowing researchers to explore “the inherent flux and instability in the ways that communities form, evolve and eventually change into new constellations” (Lønsmann, Hazel and Haberland 2017: 267). As argued above, transience is not a new phenomenon (though transience may be experienced as a more salient feature of modern life for many people than at previous points in history), but by turning the analytical gaze towards settings characterized by transience, we may begin to explore aspects of social life which are relatively less explored than others. Thus, social settings characterized by transience may, just to mention a single example, provide fruitful empirical cases for the study of how linguistic diversity comes to be meaningful for diverse social groups (cf. Barfod 2018, Moore 2017, Kraft *et al.*), enabling scholars to gain a purchase on the vexed question of how social and linguistic norms emerge, develop and transform over time (cf. the discussion of Pitzl 2018 above).

The change in perspective offered by the study of transient settings can be illustrated by considering the case of ‘code switching’. Sociolinguistic theory has based a number of its core concepts (like ‘domain’) on the experience – and, to some extent, theoretical construction – of relatively stable bilingual communities. According to Fishman’s studies of Puerto Ricans in New York (Fishman *et al.* 1971) and Blom and Gumperz’ (1972) study of the village of Hemnesberget in Norway, there are clear expectations about what language or dialect to speak to whom and when and about which topic in such communities. In Hemnesberget, for instance, the relative stability of shared norms for the use of a spoken language close to the written standard of *Bokmål* vs the local *Ranamål* famously allows speakers to utilize language (or dialect) choice as a meaning-making resource through ‘metaphoric’ or ‘situational’ code-switching.

The model proposed by Blom and Gumperz for code-switching in Hemnesberget has received criticism for being empirically ill-founded and overly simplistic in its account of the sociolinguistic reality of the community (Mæhlum 1996). Nevertheless, the study has been enormously influential and therefore serves as a good example of how powerful sociolinguistic theory can be when the complexity of social and linguistic reality is condensed into relatively simple sociolinguistic formulae. As the example above from Bloomfield (1926) illustrates, linguists have for a long time sought to provide stable models for unstable phenomena in an attempt to make description possible at all, and in the case of Blom and Gumperz, the strategy was successful.

But simplification only gets us so far. Later research on code-switching and related topics has done much to complexify the models developed in the early days of sociolinguistics (see overview in Auer and Eastman 2010), and researchers have repeatedly shown, from various perspectives, that code-switching – to the extent that this is even considered a relevant term (often it is not) – is a much more complex matter than indicated in early descriptions, empirically as well as theoretically. The study of transient multilingual settings offers a new methodological perspective on processes of ‘code-switching’, by allowing researchers to track how practices of language alternation develop over time in specific social configurations, and gradually come to be imbued with meaning. Hazel’s (2017) account of how an international and transient theater

ensemble working on a production in Denmark develop norms for the use of their joint (and only partially overlapping) multilingual repertoire is a good illustration of this point.

5. Closing remarks

In the 1970s, ‘the pragmatic question par excellence’ could be stated as follows: “How did this utterance come to be produced?” (Haberland and Mey 1977: 8). This question is arguably still relevant today, but the range of possible factors to be included in providing an answer has grown as a result of analytical and theoretical complexification. Today, the study of communicative and social practices in transient settings offers a new vantage point from which the question may be explored, and also prompts us to ask new questions. Such additional questions include: How do hearers navigate the relative semiotic uncertainty that transience entails? How does this utterance come to mean something for the participants involved? How does this way of saying and doing things come to be established as normal practice in a setting where no shared interactional norms exist *a priori*? And many more. Transience is not a theoretical model that provides ready-made answers to these questions. It is a focalizing heuristic that directs our attention to them, identifying settings where they can be explored empirically.

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