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Superdiverse Repertoires and the Individual

by

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Superdiverse Repertoires and the Individual

Jan Blommaert & Ad Backus

Abstract:

Repertoire belongs to the core vocabulary of sociolinguistics, yet very little fundamental reflection has been done on the nature and structure of repertoires. In early definitions, repertoires was seen as a triad of language resources, knowledge of language ('competence') and a community. Due to developments in the study of language competence and in the study of social organization, this triad can no longer remain intact. In a super-diversity context, mobile subjects engage with a broad variety of groups, networks and communities, and their language resources are consequently learned through a wide variety of trajectories, tactics and technologies, ranging from fully formal language learning to entirely informal 'encounters' with language. These different learning modes lead to very different degrees of knowledge of language, from very elaborate structural and pragmatic knowledge to elementary 'recognizing' languages, whereby all of these resources in a repertoire are functionally distributed in a patchwork of competences and skills. The origins of repertoires are biographical, and repertoires can in effect be seen as 'indexical biographies'. This, then, allows us to reorient the triad of repertoires away from communities towards subjectivities, and suggest that repertoire analysis can be a privileged road into understanding Late-Modern subjectivities.

Keywords: Repertoire, language learning, subjectivity, super-diversity, globalization, competence, indexical biography, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

The term ‘repertoire’ belongs to the core vocabulary of sociolinguistics.¹ John Gumperz, in the introduction to the epochal *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication* (Gumperz & Hymes 1972 (1986)) lists ‘linguistic repertoires’ as one of the ‘basic sociolinguistic concepts’ (Gumperz 1972 (1986): 20-21) and defines it as “The totality of linguistic resources (i.e. including both invariant forms and variables) available to members of particular *communities*” (italics added). In his equally epochal *Discourse Strategies*, he reformulated this notion, basically juxtaposing his original definition with the wider range of phenomena programmatically addressed by Hymes (1972a (1986); 1975):

“Studies of language use are called for which concentrate on what Hymes calls the *means of speaking*. This includes information on the local *linguistic repertoire*, the totality of distinct language varieties, dialects and styles employed in a community. Also to be described are the *genres* or art forms in terms of which verbal performances can be characterized, such as myths, epics, tales, narratives and the like. Descriptions further cover the various acts of speaking prevalent in a particular group (...), and finally the ‘frames’ that serve as instructions on how to interpret a sequence of acts.” (Gumperz 1982: 155; italics in original; cf also Bauman & Sherzer 1975: 7)

The narrower notion of ‘linguistic repertoires’ is here combined with the broad and somewhat less precise notion of ‘means of speaking’. The job of the Gumperz-Hymesian sociolinguists was to describe *all* of that, to put these things in relation to each other, and to interpret them in terms of that other key notion

¹ This paper grew out of discussions within the Max Planck Sociolinguistic Diversity Working Group. A preliminary version was presented at a colloquium on sociolinguistic superdiversity held at the Max Planck Institute for Ethnic and Religious Diversity, Göttingen, November 2010, as a plenary lecture at the 32nd Ethnography in Education Forum at the University of Pennsylvania, February 2011 and as a lecture in the series *The Future of Educational Studies*, University of Luxemburg, September 2011. We are grateful for the comments provided by audiences at all of these occasions, in particular those of Jens-Normann Jörgensen, whose incisive comments greatly improved the argument in this paper. This paper draws extensively on a broader-aimed one, Blommaert & Backus (2011), and anticipates further developments in this direction.

in sociolinguistics, ‘communicative competence’ – the *knowing what and knowing how* to use language which Hymes pitted against Chomskyan ‘competence’ (Hymes 1972b is the locus classicus, see also Hymes 1992). ‘Repertoire’ so became the word we use to describe all the “means of speaking” i.e. all those means that people *know how to use and why* while they communicate, and such means, as we have seen, range from linguistic ones (language varieties) over cultural ones (genres, styles) and social ones (norms for the production and understanding of language). In the eyes of Gumperz, Hymes and their peers, repertoires were tied to particular *speech communities*, the third key sociolinguistic notion. Repertoires characterized communities within which the sharedness of repertoire guaranteed smooth and ‘normal’ communication. This collocation of repertoires and communities was a precipitate of, let us say, ‘traditional’ ethnography, in which the ethnographer studied a ‘community’ – a group of people that could somehow be isolated from the totality of mankind and be studied in its own right.

This is very much where the concept has stayed since then; there has not been much profound reflection on the notion of repertoire.² The term is commonly used in sociolinguistics, usually as a loosely descriptive term pointing to the total complex of communicative resources that we find among the subjects we study. Whenever ‘repertoire’ is used, it presupposes *knowledge* – ‘competence’ – because ‘having’ a particular repertoire is predicated on knowing how to use the resources that it combines. The four decades of use of the term and its links to other concepts, however, have seen quite some shifts and developments, notably in the field of what one can broadly call ‘language knowledge’. This paper seeks to engage with these developments and to bring them to bear on the notion of repertoire. If patterns of language knowledge are better understood, we may be in a position to be more precise in what we understand by repertoires. Likewise, we have moved on in our understanding of ‘community’; and here, too,

² The other key notions, in contrast, did attract a considerable amount of theoretical reflection. Hymes himself questioned the idea of isolated and closed speech communities in his essay on the concept of ‘tribe’ (Hymes 1968); more recent critiques of the traditional concept of speech communities include Rampton (1998). Blommaert (2005, 2010) announced the crucial role of repertoires in further work and spelled out its potential relevance.

important new insights can be projected onto the concept of repertoire. Repertoire can so be turned into an empirically more useful and theoretically more precise notion, helpful for our understanding of contemporary processes of language in society.

This is the intellectual motive for this paper. There is, however, a more practical (or polemical) motive as well. In spite of significant advances in the field of language knowledge, dominant discourses on this topic seem to increasingly turn to entirely obsolete and conclusively discredited models of language knowledge. The European Common Framework for Languages is naturally the most outspoken case, but language and literacy testing methods predicated on linear and uniform 'levels' of knowledge and developmental progression are back in force. Such practices and methods have met debilitating and crippling criticism from within the profession (see the essays in Hogan-Brun 2009; also Spotti 2011); yet they remain unaffected and attract more and more support among national and supranational authorities in fields of immigration, labor and education. Something is seriously wrong there, and this paper can be read as yet another attack on the linguistic and sociolinguistic assumptions underlying this complex of tests and models.

In the next section, we will summarize the most important developments our understanding of the structure of contemporary societies. Armed with these insights, we will set out to describe patterns of learning "the means of language". Such patterns, we will argue, are widely different in nature and in 'technology', they range from highly formal modes of patterned learning to highly informal and ephemeral 'encounters' with language. These different modes of learning and acquiring lead to different forms of knowledge, and this is the topic of the next section. We will consider the repertoires that can emerge from the widely varied modes of learning and highlight some less expected modes of 'knowing language' as elements of repertoires. In a final concluding section, we will connect such repertoires to the wider historical frame in which they operate: Late Modernity and its particular forms of subjectivity. Let us now turn to some central insights which we need to take on board in this exercise.

2. Superdiversity

Questions of what is shared and not in the field of cultural (including linguistic) knowledge acquire a particular urgency and relevance in the context of superdiversity. Superdiversity is a descriptive term, denoting the new dimensions of social, cultural and linguistic diversity emerging out of post-Cold War migration and mobility patterns (Vertovec 2007). The new migrations characterizing the post-1991 order in many parts of the globe, as well as the emergence of mobile global communication systems such as the internet, have led to extreme degrees of diversity to which the application of notions such as 'diaspora', 'minority', but also 'community' and other basic terms from the social-scientific register have become increasingly problematic. 'Ethnic' neighborhoods have turned from relative homogeneity into highly layered and stratified neighborhoods, where 'old' migrants share spaces with a variety of 'new' migrants now coming from all parts of the world and involved in far more complex and unpredictable patterns of migration than the resident and diaspora ones characterizing earlier migration patterns. And while social life is primarily spent in such local neighborhoods, the internet and mobile phone afford opportunities to develop and maintain social, cultural, religious, economic and political practices in other places. Exiled political leaders can remain influential political actors in their countries of origin, even when they live in Rotterdam, Marseille or Frankfurt; isolated individuals can maintain intense contacts (and live social and cultural life) in a transnational network; languages can be used through such networks as well, while they are absent from everyday communicative practices in the local neighborhood. In general, most of the 'normal' patterns of social and cultural conduct that were central in the development of social-scientific theories have now been complemented with a wide variety of new, 'abnormal' patterns, for which we are hard pressed to provide adequate accounts.

The impact of superdiversity is therefore paradigmatic: it forces us to see the new social environments in which we live as characterized by an *extremely low degree of presupposability* in terms of identities, patterns of social and cultural behavior, social and cultural structure, norms and expectations. People can no

longer be straightforwardly associated with particular (national, ethnic, sociocultural) groups and identities; their meaning-making practices can no longer be presumed to 'belong' to particular languages and cultures – the empirical field has become extremely complex, and descriptive adequacy has become a challenge for the social sciences as we know them.

The implications of this for sociolinguistics have been sketched in a growing body of work (e.g. Blommaert 2010; Creese & Blackledge 2010; Otsuji & Pennycook 2010; Jørgensen et al 2011; Blommaert & Rampton 2011 provide an overview), and they revolve around: (a) an increasing problemization of the notion of 'language' in its traditional sense – shared, bounded, characterized by deep stable structures; (b) an increasing focus on 'language' as an emergent and dynamic pattern of practices in which semiotic resources are being used in a particular way – often captured by terms such as 'linguaging', 'polylingualism' and so forth; (c) detaching such forms of 'linguaging' from established associations with particular groups – such as 'speech communities' or 'cultures'; (d) viewing such groups exclusively in terms of emerging patterns of semiotic behavior with different degrees of stability – 'speech communities' can be big and small, enduring as well as extremely ephemeral, since they emerge as soon as people establish *in practice* a pattern of shared indexicalities; (e) and seeing people as moving through a multitude of such groups in 'polycentric' social environments characterized by the presence and availability of multiple (but often stratified) foci of normativity.

All of this is grounded in sociolinguistic and linguistic-anthropological work (e.g. Silverstein 2004; Agha 2007). It is clear that work on communication in superdiverse environments is not well served with a priori notions of 'language', 'community', or 'understanding', but must proceed from observations of actual usage, and that it must allow for tremendous variability in observation and interpretation.³ The stability that characterized the established notions of language can no longer be maintained in light of the intense forms of mixing and blending occurring in superdiverse communication environments (both in spoken

³ In Blommaert & Backus (2011), we examine the compatibility of these insights with recent developments in usage-based linguistics.

and written forms of language; for the latter see e.g. Juffermans 2010 and Varis & Wang 2011), and established notions of competence are in need of revision in light of the highly unequal patterns of distribution of communicative resources resulting in the often ‘truncated’ and ‘unfinished’ character of communication (see e.g. Blommaert 2010, chapter 4; Kroon, Dong & Blommaert 2011).

In what follows, we shall engage with the paradigmatic challenge of superdiversity and revisit patterns of language learning and the repertoires that are results of such learning processes. The attempt is to *reconstruct* the concept of repertoire in a descriptively realistic manner, driven by our usage-based focus and attempting to avoid as much of the traditional linguistic and sociolinguistic biases as possible.

3. Language learning trajectories

In superdiverse environments, patterns of ‘learning’ languages are widely diverse. ‘Learning’ is a somewhat uneasy term that requires qualification, and this will become clear when we review some patterns below. We use the term here for the broad range of tactics, technologies and mechanisms by means of which specific language resources become part of someone’s repertoire. ‘Acquisition’ is another candidate as shorthand for this complex of phenomena and processes, but the term suggests an enduring outcome (resources have been ‘acquired’ once and for all), while ‘learning’ does not (one can ‘unlearn’ or ‘forget’ what one has learned). Hence the pragmatic choice for ‘learning’.

3.1. The biographic dimension of repertoires

With the distinction between ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’, we have already introduced a major differentiating feature into our discussion: the fact that some effects of learning are permanent and enduring (e.g. learning the grammatical patterns of a prominent language in one’s repertoire), while others are temporary and dynamic. Discursive and sociocultural features would typically be temporary and dynamic, in the sense that their learning patterns closely follow the biography of the person. When someone is six years old, s/he speaks *as* a six-year old. At the age of twelve this pragmatic complex of speech practices has disappeared and has been replaced by another complex; likewise at the age of

eighteen, thirty and sixty: with each stage of life we learn the modes of communication of that stage of life, and *we unlearn part of the modes characterizing earlier stages*. At the age of forty, we cannot speak as a teenager anymore. We can speak *like* a teenager, i.e. imitate the speech forms we observe in teenagers (or remember from our own teenage years); but we cannot speak *as* a teenager, deploying the full range of communication resources that define people as teenagers. At the same age, we cannot yet speak as a very old person – learning these resources will happen later in life. We can speak as a middle-aged person, and the resources we can deploy define us as such.

This must be kept in mind: the ‘language’ we know is never finished, so to speak, and learning language as a linguistic *and* a sociolinguistic system is not a cumulative process; it is rather a process of growth, of sequential learning of certain registers, styles, genres and linguistic varieties while shedding or altering previously existing ones. Consequently, there is no point in life in which *anyone* can claim to know *all* the resources of a language. Actual knowledge of language, like any aspect of human development, is dependent on biography. As for other aspects, knowledge of language can be compared to the size of shoes. Shoes that fit perfectly at the age of twelve do not fit anymore at the age of thirty – both because of the development of one’s body size and because of fashion, style and preference (few of us would feel comfortable in the types of shoes we wore in the 1970s). Repertoires are individual, biographically organized complexes of resources, and they follow the rhythms of actual human lives.

This means that repertoires do not develop in a linear fashion. They develop explosively in some phases of life and gradually in some others. Let us give one very clear example. A child, typically, experiences an explosion of literacy resources in the first couple of years of primary schooling. Between the age of six and eight/nine, a child passes through the intensely difficult exercise of learning how to write and read (see Kress 1997 for a classic survey and discussion) – not just technically (increasingly not just in longhand but also on a keyboard) but also ideologically, by attributing particular values to writing and reading achievements – the sociocultural norms of literacy (Collins & Blot 2003). The outcome is that starting (typically) from scratch, a child learns to write

linguistically and sociolinguistically relatively complex texts, and read large volumes of such texts. Once this revolutionary stage is over, literacy skills develop more gradually and incrementally. In the same stage of life, children learn another vast complex of linguistic and sociolinguistic practices: 'school language', the discourse patterns of formal education. S/he learns how to talk and write as a pupil, and s/he learns how to listen to and read from instructors, follow up their instructions, and convert them into regimented, ordered forms of discourse practice. The child learns genres, registers and styles that are specific to formal educational environments and have hardly any validity outside school – think of Latin, mathematics or physics as a discursive field, for instance. This, too, is a massive achievement which marks their repertoires for life, allowing more gradual expansion and development after that.

With every new stage of life we learn new linguistic and sociolinguistic patterns. Becoming a teenager involves exploring the experiential worlds of love and relationships, of sexuality, of popular culture and of identity opportunities that deviate from those preferred and organized by school or parents. Those who proceed to higher education learn how to speak and write in new ways there, and for many this period of life coincides with first experiences as someone who lives apart from his/her parents and has to navigate that new complex world of opportunities and responsibilities. Becoming an employee in the labor market involves similar dramatic jumps in learning, as one acquires the discourse patterns of specific and specialized professions as well as those of a salaried independent person and consumer, now capable of purchasing expensive items such as cars or a house (and having to manoeuvre complicated financial, legal and insurance aspects of it). Becoming a parent likewise induces one into an entire world of new discourses, just as becoming unemployed, chronically ill, a widow or widower, or a retired person come with new and highly specific linguistic and sociolinguistic resources.

3.2 Learning by degree

We learn all of these new skills and resources in a variety of ways. The most visible ways are those of formal learning environments: school and college, but

also formal training sessions, evening courses, self-study on the basis of a set curriculum, and so on. Such formal patterns of learning result in particular forms of skills and resources: uniformly distributed ones over the collective of students who participate into the same learning environment, regimented and normatively elaborated, often also with a high degree of self-awareness that this is 'knowledge' (as in "I learned German at school"). Such formal patterns of learning always go hand in hand with patterns of learning in informal learning environments – the family, peer groups, media and popular culture or just life experiences. Acquiring specific registers in adolescent and adult life is only partly an effect of formal learning; it is more often an effect of having acquired access to certain communities and groups in society – from Metallica fans to computer engineers in a telecom business, or from parents of young children to victims of a car accident, or from Catholic priests to Chinese professional colleagues – and having been exposed to the specific discourse patterns valid in such communities and groups. Naturally, the internet has become a tremendously influential provider for such informal learning environments over the past couple of decades.

Evidently, this vast range of ways in which people come across linguistic and sociolinguistic resources leads to an equally vast range of modes of learning. Let us highlight just a few, aware that the vocabulary we must use for describing certain phenomena lacks clarity and precision.

"Comprehensive" language learning

Full socialization across a lifetime in a language, including having access to the formal learning environments for such language skills and resources as well as having access to a wide range of informal learning environments will lead to a "maximal" set of resources: different language varieties, different genres, styles and registers, distributed over oral as well as literate modes of production and reception, and dynamic in the sense that one is capable to rapidly learn new forms and patterns – the gradual expansion and overhaul of one's repertoire.

"Specialized" language learning

Particular stages of life come with access to specific and specialized skills and resources. Becoming a university student, for instance, comes with access to technical and specialized registers, genres and styles (e.g. the academic essay or thesis), whose validity is entirely restricted to that part of life and that specific environment. For people all over the world, becoming immersed in the academic environment increasingly means that they learn such specialized skills and resources in different varieties of academic English. Parts of any multilingual repertoire, consequently, will often be “specialized” in the sense used here: one can be fluent and articulate in academic genres and registers in English, but not in the genres and registers of everyday life outside of academia (e.g. those valid in supermarkets or in a medical doctor’s office).

Those two patterns of learning we would consider to be profound and enduring; the second type usually is nested in the first one, as one specific pattern of socialization encapsulated in more general patterns of socialization. They account for what Hymes (1972b, 1992) understood by ‘communicative competence’: the capacity to be a ‘full’ social being in the communities in which one spends his/her life; the capacity for ‘voice’, i.e. to make oneself understood by others in line with one’s own intentions, desires and ambitions, and this in a wide range of social arenas (Hymes 1996). When we see people as ‘fully integrated’ members of some group, it is because they have acquired such elaborate forms of language skills and resources.

Apart from those elaborate patterns of learning, however, we need to consider a number of others: more ephemeral and restricted ones. Let us turn to some such patterns.

“Encounters” with language

In the context of globalization, people and linguistic resources are mobile; consequently, one can come across particular bits of language, learn them in particular ways, and use them. In contrast to the two previously mentioned modes of learning, we are facing *minimal* modes of learning here: we learn very small bits of language, not the elaborate sets of genres, styles and registers we

discussed above. Let us survey some of them; they may illustrate what is undoubtedly a much broader range of 'minimal' forms of language learning.

-Age-group slang learning. In particular stages of life, people pick up particular bits of language that typify and identify them as members of age groups, professional groups and so on. Thus, most middle-aged people still have a repertoire of 'dirty words', obscenities and obscure slang expressions learned during adolescence. Together they amount to a whole discourse system, to be used in particular social arenas with peer group members and an occasional outsider. While such complexes define particular stages in life, they tend to become less frequently used in later stages of life and ultimately live on as an obsolete, anachronistic discourse system.

-Temporary language learning. People who frequently travel often learn small bits of the local languages, sometimes sufficient to conduct very short conversations within specific genres (e.g. ordering a meal in a restaurant or saying that you don't speak or understand the other's language), to perform more elaborate greeting rituals or engage in some minimal form of social bonding with local people. Often, such learned skills and resources do not survive; they are gradually forgotten and disappear from one's repertoire. Yet they were learned and were part of someone's repertoires at some point in time.

-Single word learning. Many of us know single words from languages we otherwise do not speak, write or understand. Isolated greeting formulae from different languages would very often feature in the repertoire of many people: 'sayonara' and 'konnichi wa?' from Japanese, 'ni hao' from Chinese, 'shalom' from Hebrew, 'salem aleikum' from Arabic, 'ciao' from Italian, 'karibu' from Swahili, and even 'aloha' from Hawai'an: they all belong to a globalized vocabulary known to large numbers of people. Similarly, terms related to the use of food or drinks ('salud!', 'santé!', 'Gesundheit!', 'nazdrovje!', 'bon appétit'), expressions for yes or no ('njet!', 'Jawohl!') or curses and insults ('cojones!', 'hijo de puta', 'cornuto',

'merde', 'asshole', 'sucker', 'Schweinhund' etc.) are widely available candidates for single-word learning. The point is that such terms are often the *only* words we know in some language, but that they *nevertheless* represent a minimal form of learning and a minimal form of knowledge. It is not as if we don't know these words.

-Recognizing language. There are many languages we do not actively use or understand, but which we are nevertheless able to recognize and identify, either on the basis of sound or on the basis of script. Thus, many people in Western Europe would recognize Chinese, Arabic, Cyrillic and Greek scripts, even if they are not able to read texts written in that script. Some may even recognize Thai or Amharic script, and many would recognize the particular visual image of Finnish and French in writing. Similarly, people who live in immigrant neighborhoods may be able to tell the language people are speaking, even if they don't understand these languages: these people are speaking Turkish, others Russian, others German, others Arabic. Recognizing language is the effect of a learning process – typically an informal one – and it results in the capacity to identify people, social arenas and practices, even if one is not able to fully participate in such practices. It is again a – minimal – form of language knowledge which goes hand in hand with social knowledge. Recognizing someone as a speaker of Turkish involves identifying that person as a Turkish person, and it triggers a world of ideas and perceptions: ideas about Turkish people, about their religion, culture and presence in a particular place; insertion into widely circulating discourses on multiculturalism, Islam, the wearing of the veil, and so forth. Recognizing language is an important emblematic process in which language projects social, cultural, ethnic and political categories and social and spatial demarcations (recognizing Hebrew writing, for instance, can make one realize that one has entered a Jewish neighborhood). Minimal knowledge of language here connects to maximum knowledge of society.

The first two modes surveyed above are 'transitory' patterns of language learning: bits of language(s) are learned but lose active, practical deployability

after some time. The two latter ones are usually not seen as ‘language learning’, either because of the extremely small amounts of language learned, or because no active competence in the language has been acquired. Yet in all of these cases, such bits of language are part of our repertoires; they document moments or periods in our lives when we encountered language(s). Encounters with language account for the otherwise inexplicable fact that we often know more ‘languages’ than we would usually acknowledge or be aware of; that we recognize sometimes very alien forms of language; that we achieve particular small communicative routines without ever having been deeply immersed in the language or having gone through an elaborate formal training and learning process.

“Embedded” language learning

We sometimes learn bits of language that can only be used if another language is used as well. Thus, there are forms of learning in which the finality of learning is to perform code-switching in an appropriate way. Computer-related terminology is often a case in point: all over the world, English vocabulary associated with the use of computers would be used as an embedded vocabulary in discourses conducted in other languages (Dutch IT engineers, consequently, would speak Dutch with English vocabulary embedded). The school languages that are not studied for achieving productive fluency in them – think of Latin and Greek, but increasingly also German and French in Europe – would typically be languages that only exist as embedded parts of instructional discourses in another language. A Dutch secondary school student learning Latin would use Latin only as part of Dutch instructional discourses, consequently. One can also think of hobby activities that involve exposure to other-language vocabulary: Yoga, Feng Shui, Karate, but also Italian or Oriental cooking would produce discourses in one language dotted by specific terms or expressions from another language. Thus people practicing Japanese martial arts would go to the *dojo* for practice and would listen to their *sensei* calling ‘*mate!*’ – even when that sensei is a full-blooded Antwerp native who has no competence whatsoever in Japanese beyond the specialised register of the sport s/he practices. Note that such specialized embedded bits of language can be quite large, running into dozens if not

hundreds of expressions. These bits, however, do not make up a 'language' in the sense of an autonomously functioning set of resources, they always need scaffolding from another language.

The 'minor' forms of language learning typically occur in informal learning environments: through everyday social contacts with others, traveling, media, internet use, peer group memberships, exposure to popular culture, and so forth. When such forms of learning coincide with formal learning programs, as with 'school languages', we see the emergence of different, specific registers across the range of languages learned – 'school languages' become *polycentric* sociolinguistic objects whenever they are 'taken out' of school and used to poke fun at each other or to imitate teachers and stereotypical characters associated with the language. This was the case with the 'Deutsch' Ben Rampton observed in UK schools, where pupils used bits of school German to bark commands at each other (Rampton 2006). An imagery of Second-World War Nazi stereotypes was never far away, and the pupils drew on this rich indexical source by turning school German into an emblematic resource for playful brutality and oppressiveness. The same thing happens when language material from outside school is 'brought into' schools and blended with the formally learned bits – as when the formally learned RP accent in school English is replaced by a 'cooler' American accent in the schoolyard; or when a degree of competence in school English is used as a platform to experiment with alternative forms of writing, as in 'boyz' or 'cu@4'; or when children in a Barbadian classroom get reprimanded by their teacher for inserting Rasta slang into their speech (Van der Aa 2012).

Formally and informally learned language and literacy resources merge into repertoires, and such repertoires reflect the polycentricity of the learning environments in which the speaker dwells. The precise functions of such resources can only be determined ethnographically, i.e. from within the group of users, from below. Thus, as every parent knows, it is by no means a given that the most normatively regimented varieties of languages – 'correct' school varieties, in other words – carry most prestige and operate as a yardstick for social interaction. The specific blend of different bits of language – the fusion of grammatical correctness (acquired in a formal learning environment) with

fluency in an adolescent slang (derived from informal learning environments), for instance – provides the actual resources deployed by people. Evidently, such resources (or ‘features’, Jorgensen et al 2011) can be part of what is conventionally defined as ‘one language’ – Dutch, English, German – but they may also be derived from a variety of conventionally defined ‘languages’. The repertoires of people absorb whatever comes their way as a useful – practical and/or pleasant – resource, as long as such resources are accessible to them. The complexity of polycentric learning environments (something that escalates as an effect of the growing importance of new media, as mentioned earlier) ensures that new ‘markets’ for linguistic resources become accessible: linguistic resources that were until recently almost exclusively accessible through formal education (e.g. normative varieties of English) now become available through a multitude of other, often more democratically organized channels (see e.g. Blommaert 2010, chapters 2 and 6; Block 2012).

This creates complex and layered repertoires; at the same time, it raises a wide variety of issues regarding normativity and stratification in the social use of language. While some resources (e.g. HipHop English) have become democratically distributed resources, the normative varieties of English remain accessible only through access to exclusive learning environments. This also counts for literacy resources: whereas literacy historically was intimately tied to access to formal schooling, we see that alternative literacies (such as ‘cu@4’) can be easily and quickly learned through informal learning trajectories (Velghe 2011). This democratization of access to literacy resources has, however, not removed the hierarchy between ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ writing: it has highlighted and emphasized it. The expansion of the modes of language learning has not resulted in a more egalitarian field of language learning; it has led (and is leading) to increased stratification and polycentricity.

4. Knowledge of language(s)

We have seen that repertoires are the result of polycentric learning experiences; we have also seen that they involve a range of learning trajectories, from maximally formal to extremely informal – in fact, that we often learn bits of

language(s) without being aware of it; and we have seen that they involve a range of learning outcomes, from 'full' active and practical competence down to a level where language(s) are just recognizable emblems of social categories and spaces, a form of learning that does not require any active and practical competence. All of those very different resources are part of our repertoires, and all of them have or can acquire a multitude of functions.

Let us now turn to someone's actual repertoire. For the sake of argument, we shall discuss the repertoire of the first author of this paper. Pending the development of a more accurate vocabulary, we shall be compelled to list languages as named entities and to group oral and literacy skills. The categorizations we will have to use in this exercise are necessarily clumsy and inadequate; we hope to give an impression, though, of the diverse and layered structure of a repertoire. We shall also describe the synchronic repertoire, i.e. the resources that are active in our subject's repertoire at present; past temporary language resources will not be listed (our subject learned, e.g. particular bits of several African languages in the course of his life, but cannot claim any active competence in those languages now).

We shall proceed in three stages: first we shall list the different languages from which particular resources have entered the repertoire, after which we shall attempt to introduce distinctions in the actual skills and competences they involve. Finally, we shall comment on the biographical basis of this repertoire.

4.1. Thirty-eight languages

Let us distinguish between four large categories of competence – the actual practices and skills enabled by the resources we shall list.

- a. The first level would be '**maximum**' competence: oral as well as literacy skills distributed over a variety of genres, registers and styles, both productively (speaking and writing skills) and receptively (understanding oral and written messages), and in formal as well as informal social arenas. Resources from two languages qualify for inclusion here: Dutch and English. Note that in both languages, our subject would also be competent in at least some intra-language varieties.

In Dutch, several regional dialects and slang codes are known; and English covers (at least receptive) competence in different kinds of regional UK and US English, different international ('world') accents, some Pidgin and Creole varieties of English, and specialized varieties such as Rasta slang and HipHop slang.

b. The second level would be '**partial** competence': there are very well developed skills, but they do not cover the broad span that characterized the first category, of genres, registers, styles, production and reception, and formal and informal social arenas. Thus, our subject can read relatively complex texts, but not write similar texts; he can understand most of the spoken varieties but not make himself understood in speaking them; or he can use the language resources rather fluently as an embedded language in another one. Six languages qualify for inclusion here: French, German, Afrikaans, Spanish, Swahili and Latin. Knowledge of intra-language varieties is minimal here (our subject would be able to recognize various regional varieties of French but not of German, for instance).

c. The next level is '**minimal competence**': our subject can adequately produce and/or understand a limited number of messages from certain languages, confined to a very restricted range of genres and social domains: shopping routines, basic conversational routines and stock expressions. Eight languages qualify: Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Greek, Finnish, Russian, Portuguese, Lingala.

d. Finally, there is '**recognizing** competence. Obviously our subject is able to recognize all the languages listed in the three previous categories; the fourth category, however, lists languages in which our subject has *only* recognizing competence. The list is quite long: Turkish, Arabic, Korean, Northern Sami, Gaelic, Berber, Polish, Albanian, Hungarian, Czech, Serbo-Kroatian, Hebrew, Yiddish, Schwytsertütsch, Xhosa, Zulu, Gikuyu, Yoruba, Amharic, Thai, Tibetan, Tamil. We count twenty-two languages in which our subject can recognize sounds and/or scripts.

We see that our subject's repertoire combines resources from thirty-eight languages. These resources are very unevenly distributed, as we know, and while some resources allow him versatility and choice in a broad range of social contexts, others offer him only the barest minima of access and uptake. All of these resources – *all* of them – have their places and functions however, and all of them reflect particular itineraries of learning during specific stages of life and in particular places and learning environments. Let us have a look at these functions.

4.2. Competence detailed

When we look at what our subject is really capable of doing with these resources, the picture becomes extremely complex. If we divide the broad notion of competence over a number of concrete parameters that reflect the capacity to perform actual practices and the different social domains in which they can be practiced, we notice that the resources of each language listed above are differently distributed and functionally allocated within the repertoire. Someone's actual competence so becomes a patchwork of skills, some overlapping and some complimentary, with lots of gaps between them. While our subject obviously has a broad and diverse range of resources in his repertoire, there is no point at which he can be said to be capable to perform *every* possible act of language. Some of the resources offer a general and multigeneric competence, while others are extremely specialized and only occur in rigidly delineated contexts.

We will turn to the former in a moment; an example of the latter would be Latin, listed above under 'partial' competence. Our subject can adequately deploy a broad range of Latin linguistic resources ("his Latin is good", as one says in everyday parlance), but only and exclusively as an embedded language couched in Dutch instructional discourse. The Latin he knows is his own old 'school Latin' – a specific register structured along lines of translation and grammatical analysis – which is nowadays deployed only when he coaches and supervises his children's (and their friends') learning of school Latin. It is not as if he does not 'know' Latin – the knowledge of Latin, however, is confined to a particular

generic space and tied to a very small range of communicative events ('explaining' and 'teaching' Latin by means of Dutch instructional discourse). Latin is a highly specialized resource in his repertoire, and is not used autonomously but always in synergy with another language.

Let us now move to two other languages listed in the same category: French and German. We will see that, compared to Latin, those two languages offer an entirely different range of competences to our subject; we shall also see that even between these two there are major differences in the distribution of actual competences, which are an effect of the different trajectories by means of which they entered our subject's repertoire.

Let us first consider French.

FRENCH	Spoken	Spoken	Written	Written
	production	Reception	production	Reception
FORMAL	Restricted: not able to give a formal speech or lecture without preparation and scripting; partial access to courtesy and politeness norms; partial access to 'sophisticated' registers	Advanced: capable of understanding most formal genres in French	Absent: not able to write formal genres in French	Advanced: able to read most formal genres in French
INFORMAL	Advanced: capable of having conversations on a wide range of topics in a	Advanced: able to understand most informal spoken	Average: able to write some informal texts (e.g. email) without	Advanced: able to read most informal messages in French,

	vernacular variety of French	messages in French, including some regional and slang varieties	assistance	including some regional and slang varieties
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And let us now compare this to German.

GERMAN	Spoken	Spoken	Written	Written
	production	Reception	production	Reception
FORMAL	Absent: not able to produce formal speech	Average: able to understand most formal speech genres in German	Absent: not able to produce formal written text	Advanced: able to read most formal text genres
INFORMAL	Very restricted: only simple routines and responses .	Average: able to understand most spoken Standard varieties of German.	Absent: not able to produce informal written text	Average: able to read most informal Standard varieties of text.

While both languages were listed under ‘partial’ competence above, we now see that the actual ‘parts’ in which our subject has real competence differ substantially. Our subject has hardly any real competence in the production of spoken and written German; while he has some competences in the production of French. Note, however, that (a) these productive competences in French are by and large confined to informal domains, and (b) that his productive competence in spoken French is restricted to the use of a vernacular variety –

whenever he speaks French, he speaks a distinct Belgian variety of it, influenced by the Brussels dialect as well as by a Flemish-Dutch accent. Notwithstanding these restrictions, it is not unlikely that French interlocutors who encounter our subject informally and have a chat with him may find him relatively fluent in French. This fluency is generically and sociolinguistically restricted – it is a ‘truncated’ competence (Blommaert et al 2005; Blommaert 2010 chapter 4). That means that this competence is *not generative*: fluency in these informal conversations does not automatically imply fluency in other genres and social domains; competence in one sociolinguistic area does not imply fluency in any other area, nor can it a priori be seen as an engine for acquiring such fluency. Competences are as a rule sociolinguistically specific (a point very often overlooked by language teachers). They cluster around particular social arenas and become generative in those arenas (a process called ‘enregisterment’: Agha 2007; Silverstein 2004), but have no automatic applicability outside of them.

Apart from these important differences, we notice similarities. Receptive competences of our subject are present in both French and German, even if the receptive competences in French are more advanced than those in German. Our subject can thus perform with relative adequacy the roles of listener and reader in both languages, even if listening to vernacular varieties of German can be challenging. In actual interaction events, this unevenly distributed competence – receptive competence without productive competence – can give rise to various kinds of surprises, misjudgments and misunderstandings, as when German interlocutors are surprised that a very well understood German question is answered in English, not German; or when Francophone colleagues assume that our subject can adequately lecture in French because they have unproblematic informal conversations with him (or, even worse, believe that his conversational fluency indicates that he can write academic papers in French).

A full and comprehensive survey of what our subject can actually do with his repertoire would of course require an analysis of every particular resource in his repertoire – an exercise we cannot contemplate in this paper. The point should be clear however: all the elements that together compose the repertoire are functionally organized, and no two resources will have the same range and

potential. A repertoire is composed of a myriad of different communicative tools, with different degrees of functional specialization. No single resource is a communicative panacea; none is useless.

4.3. Repertoires as indexical biographies

How did these different resources enter into our subject's repertoire? Let us have a look at the very different trajectories we have to review here.

-Vernacular Dutch is our subject's *first language* – his 'mother tongue' or 'L1' as it is usually called. His first speaking skills were gathered through common socialization processes, and they were composed of a local dialect. This dialect stayed with him for the remainder of his life, even though the communicative network within which he could deploy it shrunk dramatically in the course of his life. His family moved to Brussels when he was 11; the initial social world of dialect was replaced by another one, now dominated by a vernacular variety of Standard Dutch with a distinct Brussels regional influence. These dialect backgrounds account for the distinct accent he has when speaking Standard Dutch (and every other language, for that matter). Currently, dialect is exclusively used in a tiny family network, and only in informal domains. The dialect never developed into adult repertoires nor into specialized professional repertoires; consequently the range of social roles which our subject can assume through that dialect is very limited.

-Note that the L1 was a dialect (or a complex of dialects); Standard Dutch as well as French, German and English, but also Latin and Greek were *school languages*. The fact that they were school languages accounts for the fact that some – Latin and Greek – never really transcended the level of school competences: the capacity to translate a fixed body of texts and to perform indepth grammatical analysis of them; accompanied in the initial stages of formal learning by a modest capacity to speak and write French, German and English and a well developed capacity to read formal texts in those languages. Swahili was the language in which our subject specialized during his student years. It is in a sense also a school

language: he acquired the school competences mentioned earlier and a modest productive and receptive competence in formal Standard Swahili. Part of the training he followed also included an introduction into Arabic and Yoruba, the results of which were later shrunk to the 'recognizing language' level.

-Some of these school languages, however, acquired a life after and outside school in *complementary informal learning environments*. Growing up in Brussels as a teenager meant that our subject picked up local vernacular and informal varieties of French. This accounts for his present conversational fluency in informal domains. Our subject, however, never found himself in formal social domains where French was the code, so that part of competence never developed fully. During his student years, texts in English, French and German belonged to the mandatory readings in African Studies, as well as a modest amount of texts in Spanish and Portuguese. This accounts for the fact that reading formal texts poses little problems in English, French and German. And finally, advanced studies made our subject enter the world of academic English, which became the code for formal speaking and writing in the academic field, as well as for a certain amount of informal social skills. These competences are consequently highly developed. Swahili, finally, broadened and deepened as our subject further specialized in that language, made numerous fieldwork trips documenting urban vernaculars, and eventually did some language teaching in Swahili.

-Our subject learned several languages in a *purely informal learning environment*. Bits of Spanish were learned by attempts to read Neruda's poetry, later complemented by reading some academic works in Spanish; bits of Italian through an interest in Italian cinema and mediated by competences in Latin and French; bits of Russian through reading a Teach Yourself booklet; some contemporary Greek mediated through the Ancient Greek learned at school; Lingala by social contacts with Congolese friends and colleagues; Finnish by a two-year visiting appointment in Finland; Afrikaans by frequent contacts with South

African colleagues and by fieldwork in an Afrikaans-dominant area; isiXhosa and Northern Sami also through fieldwork exposure.

-*Traveling* was a major source of new language material, and almost all of the languages listed above were at some point or another also languages of the traveling destinations of our subject. Japanese and Chinese entered the repertoire exclusively through traveling, later complemented by personal contacts with friends and colleagues. The recognizing competence for languages such as Tibetan, Serbo-Croatian and Schwytserdütsch is also an effect of traveling.

-*Life in the neighborhood*, finally, is the origin for much of what is listed under 'recognizing competence'. Our subject lives in a super-diverse inner-city neighborhood, where e.g. Turkish, Arabic, Berber, Polish, Russian, Albanian, Thai, Czech, Tamil, Hebrew and Yiddisch are frequently used and publicly displayed. The lingua franca of the neighborhood is a 'truncated' form of vernacular Dutch; hence the superficial competence in the languages of the local immigrants: they are a social and cultural compass that guides our subject in identifying interlocutors in his neighborhood.

We can see how the particular synchronic competences we reviewed in the previous section have their historical roots in the distinct ways in which they arrived to him or in which he arrived to them – the *roots* are *routes*, so to speak. Each of the resources was learned in the context of specific life spans, in specific social arenas, with specific tasks, needs and objectives defined, and with specific interlocutors. This is why our subject can seem very fluent when he speaks or writes on academic topics in English, while he can be extremely inarticulate when he has to visit a medical doctor, a lawyer, grocer or a plumber in the UK or the US. It is also why he can chat in vernacular French but not lecture in it, why he can read German but not write it, and distinguish between Turkish and Yiddisch without understanding a word of either language. And of course, this is why certain resources did not survive in the repertoire. Our subject had to devote a considerable amount of time studying Tshiluba as a student; not a

fragment of that language survived in the repertoire. The course was entirely unexciting, the exam requirements undemanding, and the opportunities to practice the language nil, the more since he and his fellow students discovered humiliatingly that no Congolese actually spoke the kind of Tshiluba their 1950s missionary-authored textbook offered them.

Each of these trajectories – all of them unique – contribute more than just linguistic material to one's repertoire. They contribute the potential to perform certain social roles, inhabit certain identities, be seen in a particular way by others (e.g. an articulate or inarticulate person, as in the example of informal versus formal French), and so on. The resources that enter into a repertoire are indexical resources, language materials that enable us to produce more than just linguistic meaning but to produce images of ourself, pointing interlocutors towards the frames in which we want our meanings to be put. Repertoires are thus indexical biographies, and analyzing repertoires amounts to analyzing the social and cultural itineraries followed by people, how they manoeuvred and navigated them, and how they placed themselves into the various social arenas they inhabited or visited in their lives.

5. Late-Modern repertoires and subjects

Let us by way of conclusion recapitulate what we intended to achieve in this paper. We set out to describe patterns of learning “the means of language”, taken here in their broadest sense as every bit of language we accumulate and can deploy at a given point in life. Such patterns, we argued, are widely different in nature and in ‘technology’, ranging from highly formal modes of patterned learning to highly informal and ephemeral ‘encounters’ with language. These different modes of learning lead to different forms of knowledge of language, and while the diversity of such modes of language is tremendous, we must accept that all of them *matter* for the people who have learned them. None of them is trivial or unimportant. Even more, we can see how a subject constituted him- or herself by analyzing the indexical biographies that are contained in the spectre of language resources they can deploy.

The relevance of the latter point should be clear. While earlier authors on repertoire emphasized the connection between (socio-)linguistic resources, knowledge and communities, we shift the direction from communities towards individual subjects. We have explained the rationale for that in section 2 above: super-diversity compels us to abandon any preconceived and presumed stable or absolute notion of community, and replace them with a more fluid view of networks, knowledge communities and communities of practice – all of them dynamic, in the sense that most of them are peculiar to particular stages of life, and those that persist through life (as e.g. the family or regional forms of memberships) change in shape and value during one's lifetime. Repertoires in a super-diverse world are records of mobility: of movement of people, language resources, social arenas, technologies of learning and learning environments. A relevant concept of repertoires needs to account for these patterns of mobility, for these patterns construct and constitute contemporary Late-Modern subjects.

'Community' is not the only notion we have to revisit; the same counts for 'language'. We have repeatedly flagged the uneasiness of our own vocabulary in describing the repertoires of contemporary subjects; the fact is that we all carry the legacy of modernist hegemonies of language and society, and that an important part of our task consists of redesigning the analytical instruments by means of which we proceed. If we look back at our subject's repertoire, we have seen that no less than thirty-eight languages are represented there. Yet, of course, none of these languages is in any realistic sense 'complete' or 'finished': all of them are partial, 'truncated', specialized to differing degrees, and above all dynamic. This also counts for the 'mother tongue', that mythical finished-state language spoken by the 'native speaker' of language-learning literature. The Dutch now spoken by our subject is different from the Dutch he spoke at the age of eight or of eighteen, not just linguistically but also sociolinguistically. He still occasionally uses his dialect, but since this dialect lost its broad social scope of application due to migration at the age of eleven, it never developed any of the registers of adult life: the register of relationships and sexuality, of parenthood, of money, death, cars and work. Whenever our subject speaks his dialect, he can only speak it from within two social roles: that of the son of his mother and the

brother of his sisters. He can no longer use it adequately during infrequent encounters with childhood friends or relatives – the dialect does not allow him the voice he wants and needs in that stage of life and that social arena. The repertoires change all the time, because they follow and document the biographies of the ones who uses them. In that sense, repertoires are the real ‘language’ we have and can deploy in social life: biographically assembled patchworks of functionally distributed communicative resources.

As for our subject: the thirty-eight languages he has assembled throughout his life may put him on the high side in terms of scope of repertoire. His life is that of a mobile subject, someone who travels extensively and whose ‘basis’ – the locality where most of his life is organized – is itself deeply colored by globalized mobility. While he may be seen as an exception, we may as well see his repertoire as unique – a unique reflex of a unique biography. But when similar exercises would be applied to other subjects, surprising results could be obtained even among biographically more ‘average’ subjects. We tend to underestimate the degree to which our lives develop along trajectories of mobility, in which we encounter, leave, learn and unlearn social and cultural forms of knowledge (such as languages) because we need to be able to make sense of ourselves. In that sense, we can see ‘structure’, or at least ‘pattern’ in repertoires that are otherwise entirely unique. The structures and patterns are dynamic and adaptable, while they are driven by shared motives and intentions: to make sense, to have voice wherever we are.

There is an angle to this that merits exploration. Voice, as we know, is subject to normative judgment – one has voice when someone else ratifies it as such. In that sense, our subject’s repertoire is a complex of traces of power: a collection of resources our subject *had to* accumulate and learn in order to make sense to others, that is, in order to operate within the norms and expectations that govern social life in the many niches in which he dwelled and through which he passed. The elements of the repertoire are resources he *needed* to deploy, practices he had to perform, in order to be ‘normal’ in the polycentric and dynamic world in which he lived. We have here a very Foucaultian view of the subject: the subject

as an outcome of power, as a complex of features of self-disciplining, as a subject perpetually subjected to regimes of normality

Thus conceived, repertoires invite a new form of analysis. No longer seen as the static, synchronic property of a 'speech community', we can now approach it as an inroad into Late-Modern subjectivities – the subjectivities of people whose membership of social categories is dynamic, changeable and negotiable, and whose membership is at any time always a membership-by-degree. Repertoires enable us to document in great detail the trajectories followed by people throughout their lives: the opportunities, constraints and inequalities they were facing, the learning environments they had access to (and those they did not have access to), their movement across physical and social space, their potential for voice in particular social arenas. We can now do all of this in significant detail, because we are no longer trapped by a priori conceptions of language, knowledge and community.

Or are we? We noted in our introduction the increasing predominance of purely modernist technologies of language 'measurement' through uniform testing. Such practices have become a central element of administrative and bureaucratic apparatuses all over the world, and they operate with exceptional power in fields such as education, labor and migration. The Common European Framework for Languages has in a very short time become an industry standard for measuring language competence far beyond Europe, and it is applied as an 'objective' tool for measuring progress in language learning, the benchmarking and accreditation of language experts such as teachers and interpreters, the 'readiness to integrate' of new immigrants as well as the 'degree of integration' of recent residents.

We do not believe that we have to engage in a lengthy comparison and critique of the assumptions underlying such standardized language measuring tools; we believe our critique of them should be clear from the way we addressed repertoires here. The conclusion of our critique is therefore obvious: such measuring instruments are a form of science fiction. They have only a distant and partial connection with (specific parts of) the real competences of people, the

way they are organized in actual repertoires, and the real possibilities they offer for communication. If we apply the Common European Framework levels for language proficiency, our subject would undoubtedly score a C2 – the most advanced level of proficiency – for English, when the language test concentrates on academic genres of text and talk. The same subject, however, would score A2 – the most elementary level of proficiency – if the test were based on how he would interact with a medical doctor, a plumber, an IT helpdesk operative, an insurance broker, and so on. So, ‘how good is his English’ then? Let it be clear that this question can only be appropriately answered with another one: ‘which English?’

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