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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 90

### **Super-diversity discourse**

by

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**Abstract:**

Super-diversity discourse is a relatively new, primarily academic discourse whose increasing presence in the domains of social work, institutional policy, urban and national politics, and the media is signalling a rapidly growing uptake, albeit one that is disciplinarily fragmented and geographically unevenly spread. Arguably, super-diversity's uptake suggests that its discourse is catching the imagination of the humanities and social sciences as a recognizably productive and an auspiciously novel vantage point that sits comfortably with certain existing explicitly post-colonial anthropological and sociolinguistic takes on diversity and identity, as well as with more recent diversity-related shifts or 'turns' towards, among other things, complexity and (urban, digital, etc.) translocality. After presenting the notion of super-diversity, exploring its conceptual Umwelt and its uptake most prominently in sociolinguistics, attention is given to the future prospects and perceived dangers surrounding its discourse.

## **1. Super-diversity and its conceptual Umwelt**

Super-diversity rests on the growing awareness that over the past two and a half decades the demographic, socio-political, cultural and socio-linguistic face of societies worldwide has been changing as a result of (a) ever faster and more mobile communication technologies and software infrastructures, along with (b) ever expanding mobility and migration activity related to major geo-political changes around 1990 (Blommaert 2012). The latter comprise the collapse and fragmentation of the Soviet communist bloc, the ending of Apartheid in South Africa, heralding a new era of democratisation and international incorporation, China's conversion to capitalism as well as India's economic reforms (Parkin and Arnaut 2012). When coining the term 'super-diversity', Vertovec (2006) tried to grasp this new condition of transnationality in which global flows of people are changing profoundly, both quantitatively and qualitatively. While the amount of people migrating keeps rising at a

steadily growing pace, Vertovec observes how the migration flows are radically diversifying. This diversification not only applies to the range of migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries, but also to the socio-economic, cultural, religious, and linguistic profiles of the migrants as well as to their civil status, their educational or training background, and their migration trajectories, networks and diasporic links (Vertovec 2007).

More than merely capturing the recent diversification of diversity and situating its onset in global history, super-diversity discourse can be taken as an emerging perspective on change and unpredictability in ever more intensively encroaching social and cultural worlds (Arnaut 2012). In this capacity, it aligns itself with critical perspectives in transnational studies which reject simplifying and reifying schemes for the complex realities of 'overheated globalisation' (the term is Eriksen's 2012) along national and/or ethnic lines – denounced as 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) and the 'ethnic lens' (Glick Schiller, et al. 2006), respectively. As such, super-diversity continues a research tradition in British social theory and (black) cultural studies about 'new identities' and 'new ethnicities' which harks back to the work of, among others, Hewitt (1986), Mercer (1994), Hall (1996), Gilroy (1996), and Back (1996), and is revisited more recently by Harris and Rampton (2010) and Werbner (2013), and explicitly brought into the ambit of super-diversity discourse by Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah (2010), Erel (2011), Rampton (2013b), and Wessendorf (forthcoming).

Several authors argue that a super-diversity perspective has a liberating potential in that it endeavours to find a "new way of talking about diversity" (Fanshawe and Sriskandarajah 2010: 33) beyond the strictures of classic multiculturalism (Phillimore 2011) or multilingualism (Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Makoni and Pennycook 2007: 29). As a representative of post-multiculturalism, super-diversity discourse discards the "big battalions" (the term is Rampton's 2010) of cultural, social and linguistic 'groupism' and the old binaries of national culture versus minority cultures, natives versus migrants, and local versus global. Such binary constructs often assume a zero-sum game in which the migrants' stronger transnational patterns of association imply that the latter is only partially integrated in local (native) society (Vertovec 2010: 90).

In contradistinction, super-diversity discourse hinges heavily on the metaphor of simultaneity as exemplified for instance in (a) 'multiple embeddedness' of migrants who, according to Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2013: 499) form networks of social relations and multiple social fields (see e.g. Berg and Sigona 2013; Schmoll and Semi 2013; Sepulveda, et al. 2011), (b) intersectionality, as "the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts (Brah and Phoenix 2004: 76; and see: Wessendorf 2010: 28-30), and (c) scalarity, which in Kell's (2013: 19)

sophisticated treatment of it implies “reading out” both the horizontal links (threads) and the vertical moves (jumps) of the interaction events and meaning-making processes unfolding over time and across contexts (see also Jørgensen, et al. 2011; Van Dijk 2011: 107; Varis and Wang 2011). In sum, the metaphor of simultaneity combines the idea of (a) superimposition, nesting, and palimpsest – of earlier and later ‘generations’ of migrants in particular neighbourhoods, for instance (Blommaert 2012: 98-102) – with the idea of (b) intersection and entanglement – for instance the combination of different codes or idioms carrying different national, class-based or ethnic indexicalities into one ‘urban vernacular’ (Rampton 2011a) whether or not understood as instances of ‘polylinguaging’ as “the use of features associated with different ‘languages’” (see also: Creese and Blackledge 2010; Jørgensen, et al. 2011: 33).

Finally, super-diversity discourse can be situated in two even more broader sets of ideas: (a) one that dates back to earlier anthropological and sociolinguistic critical studies of diversity and globalisation from the 1960s and ‘70s, and a second one (b) consisting of a number of more recent conceptual and empirical reorientations towards complexity and translocality. The first set of ideas arose from a radical postcolonial critique of anthropological practice voiced by, among others, Eric Wolf (1964), Del Hymes (1972), and Johannes Fabian (1978; 1998) (see also Arnaut 2012). Among other things, Hymes proposed reframing (cultural, linguistic, etc.) diversity in a post-colonial world, no longer in an ongoing trend of diversification – through dispersion and fragmentation in an ever ‘expanding’ world – but in processes of “*reintegration* within complex units” (Hymes 1972: 32-33; emphasis in the original). Fabian’s contribution (1978; 1998) lies in his reconceptualization of ‘culture’ via ‘popular culture’ of which he highlights (a) its internally plural character, (b) its boundary transcending potential, and (c) its infinitely emerging nature – at no point a bounded whole. Arguably, these ideas dovetail with key notions of Cultural Studies (see above) and have been mainstreamed into the anthropological concept of culture. Likewise, in sociolinguistic research on Internet-based popular culture, culture is seen above all as “outward-looking, exogenous and focused on hybridity, translation and identification” (Leppänen 2012a: 235).

The second set of ideas which lends theoretical credence and plausibility to super-diversity revolves around increasingly popular notions of complexity and translocality that intersect in discourses of urbanity, mobility and digital communication. Complexity, according to Urry (2005: 3) “investigates emergent, dynamic and self-organizing systems that interact in ways that heavily influence the probabilities of later events. Systems are irreducible to elementary laws or simple processes.” Likewise, translocality goes beyond mere transnationality in that it is “less scripted and more scattered” (Lionnet and Shu-mei-Shih 2005), and in that it allows for finer, intra-urban distinctions in connectivity and scalarity (Van Dijk 2011) opening up to spaces far beyond global cities, in rural towns and in seemingly more marginal sites worldwide (Li and Juffermans 2011; Moore forthcoming;

Wang, et al. 2013). Taken together, these two sets of ideas can shape the contours of an emerging research programme in the humanities and the social sciences that thinks through the idea that globalisation signifies the end of the world as having “an outside”; hence that human creativity realises itself in the “re-composition of the sensible”, the “poetic reconstruction of life from the inside” in a world that is finite and yet limitless (Negri 2008: 68-69, 239). In the field of contemporary sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, this is exemplified in new conceptualisations of (super-)diversity variably situated in late modern social conditions (Rampton 2006), in unequal globalization (Blommaert 2003; 2010) or in contemporary conditions of migration-driven post-nationality (Silverstein 2013).

## **2. Super-diversity discourse and linguistic production**

In sociolinguistics, ‘diversity’ is firmly lodged in a long tradition of variationist studies which endeavour to correlate variously distributed (sets of) linguistic features with stratifications of different sorts. In Eckert’s reconstruction of this tradition, she distinguishes between three waves in which actors, speakers and writers, participants in communication, become increasingly endowed with agency to transcend the established correlations between the variables of their speech and certain social categories. The third wave of variation studies, Eckert (2012: 97-98) argues, mainly referring to Silverstein’s ‘indexical mutability’ and Agha’s ‘enregisterment’, has almost reversed the relation between language and society: speakers have become “stylistic agents, tailoring linguistic styles in ongoing and lifelong projects of self-construction and differentiation” – postmodern processes which Rampton (2006: 22) identified as ‘reflexive language and artful performance’ involving agents which Jacquemet (2005: 261) typically labelled “semiotic operators”. Equally reversing the logic of variationism, Pennycook (2012: 124) recently argued that genres, discourses and styles need to be understood “as practices that form the texts, knowledge and identity of which they speak. This position then makes it possible to see language practices as part of the formation of the social.”

This take on diversity in sociolinguistics dovetails not only with the ‘new ethnicities’ or post-ethnic ‘new identities’ Cultural Studies discourse mentioned in the previous section, but also with attempts by sociolinguistics to reckon with decolonisation, globalization and the far-going repositioning of the nation-state and the way it seeks to manage, regulate, or indeed regiment ‘linguistic diversity’ and the ‘language communities’ it recognises. Although it was signalled by many others before – e.g. by Rampton (2006: 22), Blommaert (2010), Makoni and Pennycook (2007) and Mufwene and Vigouroux (2008) – Silverstein (2013) recently stressed the post-national and translocal dimension of linguistic super-diversity, remarking that: “what is captioned as ‘superdiversity’, emphasizing a plenitude of in-migrated socio-cultural and linguistic difference and hybridity beyond that countenanced by existing state

mechanisms, [is] an empirical site that ought to stimulate a new kind of sociolinguistics that renders problematic the concepts of state-focal vision.”

To some extent, this ‘new kind of sociolinguistics’ is heir to a ‘linguistics of contact’ (Pratt 1987) which has been steadily moving away from the idea of languages and speakers as discernable units towards that of sociolinguistic resources and repertoires. Overall, this implies a double shift (a) away from unitary, localized and quantifiable speech communities to transnational ones, both ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ (Leppänen 2012a; Pennycook 2012; Rampton 2000), and (b) away from presupposed fully-fluent native speakers’ competence to a sociolinguistics that looks at the individual whose competences consist rather of a plurality of ‘registers’ (Agha 2004), ‘styles’ (Rampton 2011b) and genres (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 6) that constitute ‘super-diverse repertoires’ (Blommaert and Backus 2013). Thus, the sociolinguistics that feeds into super-diversity discourse sees people as deploying sets of resources from various ‘languages’. Among the many notions for such multilingual or, more broadly speaking, transidiomatic practices (Jacquemet 2005), some have been explicitly associated with the notion of super-diversity: ‘polylinguaging’ (Jørgensen 2008) and ‘translinguaging’ (Blackledge and Creese 2010; Creese and Blackledge 2010), and more recently a ‘multilingualism of entanglement’ (Williams and Stroud 2013). Moreover, certain (named) sets of mixed features have been explicitly aligned to super-diversity, examples being ‘contemporary urban vernaculars’ (Rampton 2013b), heteroglossia (Leppänen 2012b), and supervernaculars (Blommaert 2011; but see: Makoni 2012; Orman 2012; Velghe 2011).

While locating and articulating the “agentive, liberating and resistant” dimensions of multi-modal and multilingual ‘linguaging’ (Jaspers and Verschueren 2011: 1159), contemporary sociolinguistics seeks to map ideological dynamics in the form of emerging normativity, for instance, or new, national as well as post-national regimes of surveying and controlling diversity, heteronormativity, etc. Sociolinguistics possesses a range of analytical tools to deal with situated normativity and meaning-making frames, in the form of Indexical orders (Silverstein 2003) or registers (Agha 2004), some of which are being rearticulated in the context of super-diversity, such as: normative regimentation (Rampton 2013b), orders of indexicality (Blommaert 2007), emerging normativity (Leppänen 2012a), enregistering (Blommaert and Varis 2011), language testing regimes (Blackledge 2009; Spotti 2011)..

Apart from bolstering methodological renewal either at the theoretical level of envisioning diversity or at the analytical level of dealing with language form, practice and ideology – the three dimensions of the ‘total linguistic fact’, coined by Silverstein (1985) and recently revitalized by Rampton (2013a) – sociolinguistic research introduces into super-diversity discourse a rapidly expanding range of explorative and programmatic ethnographic work in various empirical fields. Among the established fields are those of (a) youth language, most often with a special interest in identity-work both offline and online (e.g., chatting and

texting) (Jørgensen 2010; Jørgensen, et al. 2011; Leppänen, et al. forthcoming; Li and Juffermans 2011; Rampton 2013b; Spotti forthcoming; Velghe 2011), and (partly overlapping with) (b) a range of popular culture practices mostly, but not exclusively online (Leppänen and Piirainen-Marsh 2009; Madsen in press; Varis and Wang 2011; Wang 2010; Williams and Stroud 2013), (c) school or (language) teaching contexts both formal and informal (Creese and Blackledge 2010; Moore forthcoming), and (d) literacy practices mostly but not exclusively situated in the complexity of globalized urbanity (Arnaut forthcoming; Blommaert 2012; Vigouroux 2011).

### **3. Outlook: two challenges for super-diversity discourse**

The above-mentioned developments in the sociolinguistics of globalisation allow us to discern at least two of the main challenges for the future conceptualisation of super-diversity. The first challenge consists in listing the various types of diversity (from above) the second in mapping its creative potential (from below). The overall issue is raised in connection with diversity *tout court* by keen observers like Marianna Valverde and Kenneth Prewitt, former Director of the US Census Bureau. Valverde rejects assessments of certain cities or neighbourhoods as “more diverse” than others. She argues (2008: 920-921) that given the instability of diversity one cannot even hope to “quantify diversity or even locate it in any kind of stable manner”. Along similar lines, Prewitt foresees two possible outcomes, in the face of rising complexity and uncertainty in diversity classification: “either a push toward measurement (like censuses) using ever more finely-grained classifications, or system collapse – the end of measurements of difference” altogether (in Vertovec 2012: 303-304). To a large extent, the polylinguaging model of investigating multilingualism (Jørgensen, et al. 2011) or the “urban vernacular” take on “multi-ethnic heteroglossia” (Rampton 2011a) may be seen as exemplifying such a ‘system collapse’. In the words of Michael Silverstein (2013), the question is whether superdiversity is an incremental or a transformative condition.

The move from the one to the other may well resemble the shift recently called for by both Rampton (2013a) and Fabian (2012). Realizing the extent to which sociolinguists are “operating in a potentially dizzying ambience of superdiversity, post-structuralism, late modernity etc., etc.”, Rampton (2013a: 2) poses the question: “[...] how do we even start to conceptualise what the job of really fine-grained linguistic description actually entails?”. Referring to the era when culture ceased to be seen as (a collection of) bounded, countable units, Fabian (2012: 443) states: “what we lost in theoretical certainty (or security) we gained in renewed ethnographic fervour that made us study the unruly, boisterous, seemingly anarchic yet inexhaustibly creative forms of contemporary survival”. However, unless this new human and social science of ‘poiesis’ is going to be radically agency-centred



or ontology-driven (Parkin 2012), it will have to “understand how creative activity is both enabled and constrained by the conditions in which it takes place” (Calhoun, et al. 2013). In the meantime, it appears that super-diversity is negotiating this balance by re-engineering its conceptual toolbox along the structure-agency dividing line. Along with crossing, styling, and artful performance in sociolinguistics (Rampton 2009), the notions of conviviality (Blommaert 2012; Gilroy 2006; Goebel 2013; Williams and Stroud 2013) or local solidarities (Oosterlynck and Schuermans forthcoming) are meant to grasp the agentivity of diversity-driven interaction. Likewise, in line with ‘emerging normativity’ (Leppänen 2012a), notions like ‘infrastructures’ (Calhoun, et al. 2013; Simone 2010) or ‘pathways of emplacement’ whether linked to opportunity structures or not (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013: 500) may add much-needed structure-sensitive notions to super-diversity discourse.

Through conceptual exercises like these, super-diversity discourse may begin to accommodate some of the basic concerns underlying the multiculturalism discourse that it seeks to replace: (a) inequality, discrimination and marginalisation, on the one hand, and (b) internet surveillance, social sorting and profiling, on the other. Regarding the latter, it is becoming increasingly clear that the interactive Internet (Web 2.0), being an important site of consumption, socialisation and identity-work, affords a “deep government and industrial drive toward gathering and extracting maximal value from data, be it information that will lead to more targeted advertising, product design, traffic planning or criminal policing” (Crawford in Varis forthcoming). More generally speaking, digital media constitute a post-panoptical governmentality whose subjectivity effects arise, among other things, from “identity formation that works through mathematical algorithms to infer categories of identity” (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 165) and, indeed ‘diversity’. Recently, Varis (forthcoming) and Arnaut (2012; 2013) have discussed these issues in connection with super-diversity. While sharing a common concern over how the ‘superdiverse’ subject may be neoliberalism’s ideal multifaceted, 360° consumer, Arnaut (2012: 10ff) calls for a ‘critical sociolinguistics of diversity’ while Varis specifically draws attention to the dangers of internet-driven people and populations management – Lyon’s ‘social sorting’ and the way it inscribes existing and new inequalities into contemporary ‘superdiverse’ societies.

With respect to the issue of inequality, Makoni (2012: 193) conjectures that “superdiversity contains a powerful sense of social romanticism, creating an illusion of equality in a highly asymmetrical world [...]” (see also: Berrey 2005: 145; Block 2012: 59). Recently, Rampton (2013a: 3) observed that “potentially crucial aspects of their informants’ social, political, rhetorical or linguistic positioning are obscured, and this lets in the romantic celebration of difference and creative agency that has been so common in sociolinguistics, or the presumption of deficit and remedial need in SLA (Second Language Acquisition)”. More generally, Sepulveda, et al. (2011) point out that “... the manner in which views concerning

the diversification of diversity have been taken forward into the political agenda has led to an overemphasis upon cultural and localised differences at the expense of structural inequalities and a politicized retreat from multiculturalism.” One of the main challenges to superdiversity, so it seems, has already been formulated in a critique of its kindred notion of intersectionality by one of the latter’s founding mothers, Nira Yuval-Davis (1999: 95): “differences are important [...], but [...] notions of difference should encompass, rather than replace, notions of equality.” With super-diversity continuing to accommodate and nourish such critical debates as that of listing its various types versus focusing on its transformative qualities, or that of difference versus inequality, it may well gain centre stage in any future re-keying of the human and social sciences.

**SEE ALSO: →Multiculturalism→Minorities→Communication Theory and Philosophy  
→Identities and Discourse→Diversity→Globalisation→Digital media→Digital Culture→Self  
→Cultural and Critical Theory**

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