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Paper **260**

What do we mean by 'multilingual'? Linguistic repertoires

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What do we mean by ‘multilingual’?: Linguistic repertoires

(NB: If this paper is printed out, it would be better in **coLoUR** for the transcripts)

Instead of seeing multilingualism as a plurality of ‘named languages’, this sociolinguistics briefing note argues that we should approach it as:

- a repertoire of styles and linguistic resources, tuned to particular communicative settings and spheres of life, developed over the course of a person’s biographical experience.
- Superdiversity makes the relationships between language and identity more unpredictable, but there are still socio-linguistic structures that guide the ways we talk.

Here’s a quotation from Jan Blommaert:

“Multilingualism should not be seen as a collection of ‘languages’ that a speaker controls, but rather as a complex of *specific* semiotic resources, some of which belong to a conventionally defined ‘language’ while others belong to another ‘language’. The resources are concrete accents, language varieties, registers, genres, modalities such as writing – ways of using language in particular communicative settings and spheres of life, including the ideas people have about such ways of using, their language ideologies” (Blommaert 2010:102)

What exactly does this mean? Let’s illustrate it with some real speech examples, taken from recordings of Anwar, a successful middle-aged London businessman and local activist talking on the phone.

Here is Anwar talking to Ronni, an old friend from school. He’s speaking in a style that he says he always uses with schoolfriends from the past (indeed, I recorded very similar speech among young people over 30 years ago). The transcript below shows how this well-established style blends elements that derive from different languages. **Red** shows parts pronounced with a **London vernacular** accent, **BLUE** shows **STANDARD** pronunciation, **green** indicates **Punjabi/Urdu** words and pronunciations, and the **underlining in orange** shows a Jamaican word (pronounced with a Punjabi accent):

Excerpt 1 (see the appendix for transcription conventions):

```
Anwar:  ((ending business discussion:))
         tennu pata hai yaar
         {trans: you know, friend}
Ronni:  ((responds for 1.7 secs))
Anwar:  Aor kiddan
         {trans: what else}
         wha's goin' down man
         everyfiNG cool
Ronni : ((responds for 2.3))
Anwar:  How's 'iNGs a' e yard
Ronni:  ((responds for 2.0))
Anwar:  THE ol' lady alriGH'
```

Rather than limiting ourselves to named languages and thinking of this speech as a deficient version of English or Punjabi, it makes more sense to follow Blommaert and conceptualise it as a locally conventional “way of using language in a particular communicative setting”.

Here are some more examples of Anwar retuning his language to the different people he's talking to.

So here he is talking to a woman from Sri Lanka who has worked for him in the past, but isn't very fluent in English (he says his daughter criticises him when she hears him talking 'bud bud' like this, but he claims that it just happens naturally):

Excerpt 2:

1 Anwar: **HELLO:** yes e:h (.)
2 hello **rachel**
3 how are you
4 you **okay**
5 R: ((speaks for 3.0))
6 Anwar: ye::s you keeping well?
7 R: ((speaks for 5.0))
8 Anwar: ya:h
9 R: ((speaks for 2.0))
10 Anwar: yah **I need** you **do** job fo:r **me**

Green = Punjabi/Urdu **BLUE = STANDARD** **Red = London vernacular**

In the next conversation, the proportions of standard, vernacular and Punjabi elements shift again. This time he's talking to a barrister (whose speech he describes as 'polished'):

Excerpt 3:

Anwar: oh oh **OKAY** yeah 'a's great
.hh e:::hm **BILAL**
THE REASON why I **called** you is e::h
I jus' **WANTED TO LET** you **KNOW**
THAT xxxxx xxxx he came (.)
and e:: we **DECIDED not to** pursue **His** case(.)
Bilal: [right
Anwar: [**and** e::h **He** was **GOING** back
AND e::h he was gonna ge? **His** work **permi?** visa (.) **SO** so
THAT He could **just** e::hm..
you know **DO** every**THING** above eh eh above board **d an'**

BLUE = STANDARD **Green = Punjabi/Urdu.** **Red = London vernacular**

And finally, here he is talking to a mechanic (who he describes as a "thorough-bred East Ender of Pakistani origin"):

Excerpt 4:

Ishfaq: **yeah yeah** no? too bad **bruv**
Anwar: (.) yeah y' **know** e::hm e::h
TH- THIS **These** eh **insurance** **people**
they're **REALLY** me **mucking** me **around** ri:gh?(.)
[now-

Ish: [wha? they sayin'
 Anw: **we' ye knaa a mean**
THEY're jus pussyfoo?n about?
THEY are you know (0.5)
 Ish: hhahahahaha [haha
 Anw: [you kn**aa:**
 Ish: hehehehe [hehehe
 Anw: [so::

Red = London vernacular BLUE = STANDARD **Green = Punjabi/Urdu**

Looking across these three examples, we can see that Anwar shifts his way of using language not only in particular communicative settings, but also as he moves across different “spheres of life” – talking to a mechanic, to a barrister and to an employee who doesn’t know much English. And rather than imagining multilingualism as having control of a collection of separately identifiable ‘languages’, it is more accurate to say that someone like Anwar has a varied set of linguistic resources that he employs in different proportions and blends in different situations.

But is he just an exceptional case?

There’s good evidence that he isn’t, and more generally, we need to adjust our understanding of multilingualism to contemporary **superdiversity**. Superdiversity surpasses the kind of ethnic diversity associated with multiculturalism, and it involves

“a dynamic interplay of variables including country of origin, migration channel, legal status, migrants’ human capital (particularly educational background), access to employment, locality and responses by local authorities, services providers and local residents” (Vertovec 2007:2-3).

In the UK between 1993 and 2015, the population born outside the country more than doubled (from 3.8 million to 8.7m [ONS 2017]), and with superdiversity, the relationship between language, migration and ethnicity is much harder to predict than it used to be.

There’s a glimpse of this unpredictability if we compare Anwar and his brother Naseem talking about their family business. One of them was born in England and the other in Pakistan, but can we tell from their speech which was which?

Excerpt 5:

Anwar: out of the forty years that er:: oh my age,
 twenty years of that i've been working in the business
 um:: tha's committedly and er
 well w- we used to start in a very mediocre type of set
 up

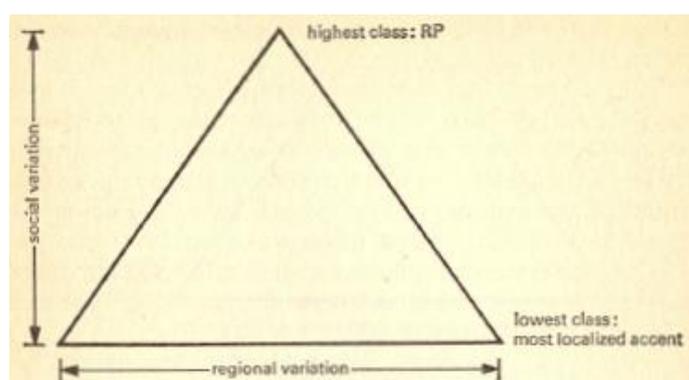
Excerpt 6:

Naseem: I doubt it (.) now there there's so many no not
 doubt it there definitely there's not there's a a lod
 of legislation (.) that you have to be under a certain
 age y' ave to- oh you're only allowed to work a
 certain amount of hours

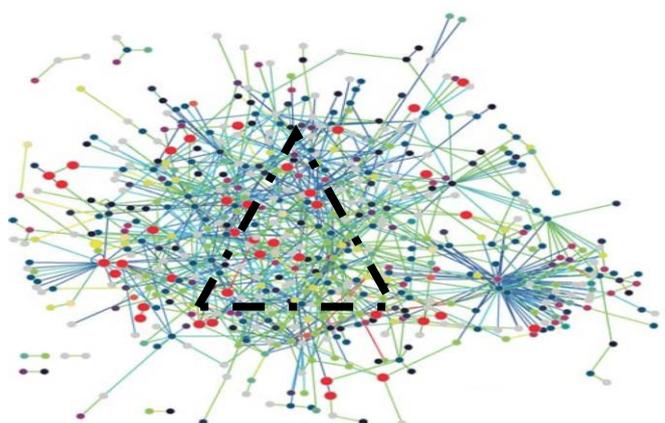
Red = London vernacular BLUE = STANDARD **Green = Punjabi/Urdu**

The influence of Punjabi is much stronger in Anwar's speech than Naseem's, but Naseem is older and actually he's the one born in Pakistan. This starts to make sense if we delve a bit deeper: Anwar is a prominent community activist, cultivates transnational business links in Pakistan, and insists that he really mixes in on regular visits there, whereas Naseem focuses mainly on work and close family, and says that when it comes to the Pakistan cricket team, he'll support anyone playing against them. Even so, the comparison shows that the relationship between where you were born and how you speak is rather more complicated than traditional terms like 'native speaker' and 'mother-tongue' suggest, and this really affects how we imagine language in British society.

In 1974, Peter Trudgill published a diagram representing the accents and dialects of English in the UK, and in this pyramid, English is more standardised higher up the class structure, showing increased regional variation lower down.



But this leaves out ethnicity and migration, and over time, this has substantially complicated the picture. Indeed, there's a good case for wondering whether it would be better to represent the different ways of speaking used in contemporary Britain in a diagram like this:



Plainly, with superdiversity and contemporary multilingualism, Trudgill's pyramid badly needs updating, but even so, if we go back to Anwar, we can see that in spite of the subtle shifting and mixing of elements from different languages in the various styles that he uses, the sociolinguistic stratification described by Trudgill is still influential in his speech.

Let's compare the way in which he asks his friend Ronni about his family with how he does this with the barrister. With Ronni, it's

Excerpt 7 (from Ex1)

Anwar: **Aor Qiddan**
 {trans: what else}
 wha's goin' down man
 everyfing cool
 Ronni : ((responds for 2.3))
 Anwar: How's 'ings a' e yard
 Ronni: ((responds for 2.0))
 Anwar: THE ol' lady alrigh'

Green = Punjabi/Urdu BLUE = STANDARD Red = London vernacular- = Jamaican word

But with the barrister, it was:

Excerpt 8:

Anwar: How's everyTHING else
 How's the familLi:

Green = Punjabi/Urdu BLUE = STANDARD Red = London vernacular

The difference is fairly obvious, and indeed, we've already seen it in Excerpts 3 and 4 in the comparison of Anwar's speech to the barrister and the mechanic. But if we take a closer look at the latter – Anwar talking to the mechanic – we can see that it's not just a matter of Anwar adjusting his style to the status and familiarity of the people he's talking to. He uses these styles *strategically*, increasing the London vernacular style to persuade the mechanic to help him out:

Excerpt 9 (from Ex4):

Speaker	Speech	Commentary
Anwar:	THIS These eh insurance peopLE they're ReaLLy me mucking me around ri:gh? (.)now-	Anwar first gives the reason for his call in fairly standard language
Ishfaq:	wha? they sayin'	Neutral response – asks for elaboration
Anwar:	we' ye knaa a mean THEY're jus pussyfoo?in about? THEY are you kNow (0.5)	Anwar doesn't provide the elaboration that Ishfaq has requested, but reformulates what he's said, shifting from standard to much more vernacular forms
Ishfaq:	hhahahahahahaha ((after the laughter, his next turn is: "right, what I'm gonna do..."))	Ishfaq engages...

So although the sociolinguistic composition of British society is much more complicated than it used to be, it hasn't completely changed, and people don't flounder chaotically in the superdiversity around them. Like Anwar, they – or rather we – recognize a range of social differences in the adjustments we make in our speech, and our capacity to shift styles and ways of speaking makes an important contribution to how effective we are, rhetorically and interactionally.

This, then, is a concrete illustration of the kind of thing that Blommaert has in mind when he says that “multilingualism should not be seen as a collection of ‘languages’ that a speaker controls, but rather as a complex of *specific* semiotic resources”, and I've shown how these resources are adjusted to different “communicative settings and spheres of life”. If we only think in terms of named languages like ‘English’, ‘Punjabi’, ‘Spanish’ or ‘Yoruba’, we will miss the complex shifts and mixings that people use, need and engage with in contemporary life.

There is one element, though, in Blommaert's agenda that I haven't properly addressed – “the ideas people have about such ways of using, their language ideologies”. I've touched on these in passing, referring for example to Anwar's ideas about ‘polished’ speech, his daughter's attitude to ‘bud bud’, as well more general notions like ‘native speaker’ and ‘mother tongue’. But ideologies of language deserve much fuller discussion in their own right, and we will concentrate on them in the next paper in this series (Rampton & Holmes 2019).

References

- Blommaert, J. 2010. *The Sociolinguistics of Globalisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2017. *Migration Statistics Quarterly Report*. February.
- Trudgill, P. 1974. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Vertovec, S. 2007. *New Complexities of Cohesion in Britain: Superdiversity, Transnationalism and Civil-Integration*. University of Oxford: COMPAS

Further reading

- Arnaut, K, J. Blommaert, B. Rampton & M. Spotti (eds) 2016. *Language & Superdiversity*. London: Routledge. (A good collection of academic papers)
- Rampton, B. 2011 From ‘multi-ethnic adolescent heteroglossia’ to ‘contemporary urban vernaculars’. *Language & Communication*. 31:276-94 (This research paper contains a much fuller discussion of Anwar's speech)
- Rampton, B. & S. Holmes 2019. How we feel and think about language: Language ideologies and the ‘total linguistic fact’. [Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies 261](#). At academia.edu.
- Weber, J.-J. & K. Horner 2012. *Introducing Multilingualism: A Social Approach*. London: Routledge. (A very useful and accessible textbook, elaborating on the approach taken in this presentation) (A substantial collection of papers covering different aspects of contemporary sociolinguistic processes, with a lot on multilingualism)

Other articles in [Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies](#) that may be of interest (<https://kcl.academia.edu/WorkingPapersinUrbanLanguageLiteracies>):

- [WP234 Cooke, Bryers & Winstanley 2018. 'Our Languages': Sociolinguistics in multilingual participatory ESOL classes](#)

- [WP233 Rampton, Cooke & Holmes 2018. Promoting Linguistic Citizenship: Issues, problems & possibilities](#)
- [WP182 Holmes 2015. Promoting multilingual creativity: Key principles from successful projects](#)
- [WP161 Holmes 2015 Monsters, myths and Multilingual Creativity](#)
- [WP152 Rampton, Blommaert, Arnaut & Spotti 2015. Superdiversity and sociolinguistics](#)
- [WP130 Khan 2014. Citizenship, securitization and suspicion in UK ESOL policy.](#)
- [WP116 Rampton & Charalambous 2013. Breaking classroom silences in London and Nicosia.](#)
- [WP106 Bryers, Winstanley & Cooke 2013. Whose integration?](#)
- [WP87 Simpson & Whiteside 2012. Politics, policy and practice: ESOL in the UK and the USA](#)
- [WP70 Blommaert & Rampton 2011. Language and superdiversity: A position paper](#)
- [WP31 Rampton 2005. Late modernity and social class: The view from sociolinguistics](#)
- [WP2 Leung, Harris & Rampton 1997. The Idealised Native-Speaker, Reified Ethnicities, and Classroom Realities: Contemporary Issues in TESOL](#)

Appendix: Conventions used in the transcripts

green	speech clearly influenced by Punjabi/Urdu
BLUE	speech clearly influenced by standard English/Received Pronunciation
red	speech clearly influenced by the London vernacular
?	glottal stop, as in the London vernacular
te : :xt	colons indicate lengthened syllable
(.)	pause of less than a second
(1.5)	approximate length of pause in seconds
((text))	'stage directions'
[overlapping utterances
[