From mobility to complexity

Jan Blommaert
Tilburg University

The introduction of globalization as a context of analysis in sociolinguistics has provoked several theoretical innovations and challenges. In a first phase, it introduced mobility as a key theoretical and analytical issue, which dislodged several assumptions that were central to sociolinguistics since its inceptions. These assumptions – a language ideology, one can now see – placed language as a bounded object within a community, again seen as a bounded object, within a synchronic space-time plane. This synchronic plane – an enduring trace of structuralism – led sociolinguists to focus on what we could call ‘immobile’ variation and distribution connected to (again, immobile) indexical fields that rendered variation and distribution socially and culturally meaningful. Thus, sociolinguistics constructed an ontology which functioned as the target of its descriptive ambitions.

The recognition of sociolinguistic globalization, however, fundamentally dislodged the immobility of sociolinguistic phenomena; it redefined the ontology of sociolinguistics and thus reshaped its descriptive scope and tactics, now also questioning the boundedness of language and community and increasingly emphasizing intra-language and intra-community diacritics. Indexical fields were shown to be strongly dependent on time-place frames of occurrence, and new forms of stratification, as effects of mobility, complemented the distributional (horizontal) toolkit of sociolinguistics.

The direction in which these theoretical and methodological developments move is that of complexity. From a structuralist ontological imagination we now move towards a post-structuralist imagination in which complex sociolinguistic systems are being defined and addressed, with nonlinear and multidirectional vectors of change, multifiliar dynamics of development and deployment, and a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability as to indexical outcomes.

This paper will sketch this trajectory from a structuralist synchrony, over mobility and towards complexity, at a paradigmatic level of sociolinguistic theory. It will show how complexity is inevitable as a frame for addressing new forms of sociolinguistic diversity, new kinds of semiotic practice online as well as offline, and new kinds of language-political responses and measures.

Jan Blommaert is Professor of Language, Culture and Globalization and Director of the Babylon Center at the University of Tilburg, The Netherlands. He also holds appointments at Ghent University (Belgium), University of the Western Cape (Zuid-Afrika), Beijing Language and Culture University (China), and is coordinator of the Max Planck Sociolinguistic Diversity Working Group. Major publications include Language Ideological Debates (Mouton de Gruyter 1999), Discourse: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge University Press 2005), Grassroots Literacy (Routledge 2008) and The Sociolinguistics of Globalization (Cambridge University Press 2010)