Heteroglossia and Superdiversity

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Abstract:
Western societies have become more diverse in recent times, as the diversity and territorial origins of migrants have expanded. This phenomenon has resulted in new demographic patterns of migration and post-migration, termed ‘superdiversity’, and characterised by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of multiple origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants and their families. This paper suggests that in such conditions multilingual speakers use verbal repertoires which draw on a wide range of signs from diverse sources. Recently a number of terms have emerged, as scholars have sought to describe and analyse flexible linguistic practices. These include, but are not limited to, ‘translanguaging’, ‘polylinguism’, and ‘metrolinguism’. The perspective represented in the use of these terms considers that meaning-making is not confined to the use of ‘languages’ as discrete, enumerable, bounded sets of linguistic resources. Rather, signs are available for meaning-making in communicative repertoires which extend across ‘languages’ and varieties which have hitherto been associated with particular national, territorial, and social groups.

This paper expands these debates, adopting the Bakhtinian notion of ‘heteroglossia’ as a lens with which to interrogate not only questions of ‘who is speaking which language to whom’ in increasingly diverse societies, but also what signs are in use and action, and what do these signs point to. A heteroglossic analysis enables us to better understand the tensions and conflicts within, among, and between those signs. Furthermore, such an analysis asks how multiple voices are represented in linguistically diverse settings. In this paper we outline how a team linguistic ethnographic approach to the investigation of language and superdiversity generates new understandings of language use. We present evidence collected over time in superdiverse cities in the UK, in which the deployment of linguistic (and non-linguistic) signs constitutes tensions, affiliations, allegiances, ideologies, and social positionings. We propose that a heteroglossic analysis ensures that we bring into play, both in practice and in pedagogy, voices which index speakers’ localities, social histories, circumstances, and identities.

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