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Journal Title: Making signs, translanguaging ethnographies: exploring urban, rural and educational spaces /

Volume: Issue: Pages: 9-35

Article Author:

Article Title: Communicating Beyond Diversity

Imprint: Bristol, UK ; Blue Ridge Summit, PA : Multilingual Matters, [2019] ©2019

ILL Number: 194310133

Call #: P99.4.S62 M33 2019

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We asked Jan Blommaert, Ofelia García, Gunther Kress and Diane Larsen-Freeman to respond to 10 questions in a succinct and cogent style for a general audience. We provided time for each to read each other's texts, revise their own and then address Question 10. When all questions were addressed, each author could go back, re-read the texts they wrote and shift these again. Here are their answers, displayed in alphabetical order of author.
(1) How would you introduce your current thinking or theoretical stance?

**Jan Blommaert:**

In a few words: encompassing, explorative and radical. I embarked some years ago on the project of critically evaluating and, whenever required, reformulating (or formulating, if you wish) social theory for a society in which social lives now continually cross from online into offline spaces and back. This new online infrastructure, in my view, is a fundamental shift in the basic ‘operating system’ of society, comparable to the mass circulation of printed book and newspapers, of the telegraph and telephone, of radio, cinema and TV, and of computers. There are entirely new ways in which people engage and interact with knowledge, artifacts, groups and ultimately with themselves – all of which demand new forms of social imagination, I base the explorative theorizing on recent insights into sociolinguistics (very broadly taken here), using (and radically implementing) the assumption that every form of social action is a form of interaction, and that insights into forms of interaction can provide us with a reliable foundation for social theory.

**Gunther Kress:**

I am interested in meaning in social interaction of any kind. As social arrangements (which had provided – and been mirrored by – the framings of ‘traditional’ disciplines) are fraying and beginning to disappear, they are giving way to hazily emergent new arrangements and different framings. Tools are needed for description and analysis to meet three requirements. First, a (at this time necessarily provisional) redrawing of the boundaries of a new and newly integrated account of meaning-making, together with criteria that support that integration. This domain can no longer be characterized in terms of existing disciplines: that is, no further recourse to any combination of multi-, inter-, cross-, trans-, etc. Second, the development of tools with the explanatory power to account for emerging social arrangement(s) and posing apt questions in the newly framed domain. Third, an ordering of theoretical terms, both at the general level of a community (that is, applying to all social practices and domains), and at the level of specific modes (applying to the materially distinct semiotic means of that domain). The framing account will include meanings that have not as yet been given full recognition, nor made theoretically evident.
Ofelia García:

I work on issues of language in society, especially in education. I believe that schools are responsible for the perpetuation of constructions of language that exclude language minoritized people. Thus, I work on re-politicizing language, while shaping ways in which schools might educate all equitably. In many ways, my work belongs in the borderlands, as Gloria Anzaldúa says, of disciplines and thinking. Resting on my early work with Joshua Fishman, I have taken what I have called a critical post-structuralist stance on language in society (García et al., 2017). As such, my stance on language and education goes beyond the functional one of much work in applied linguistics. My work attempts to expand the discussion beyond structural aspects of named standardized language that have been reified to structural issues in society and the tools by which institutionalized hierarchies of power are established. As a Latinx woman, born in Cuba and raised in NYC, my work pays attention to how colonialism and nation-state formation have shaped the construction of language in education. And yet, because my work is situated in schools, and I have deep respect for teachers and students, I attempt to frame the work so as not to leave teachers and students behind.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:

My interests lie in understanding language, its learning and its teaching. When I first encountered Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), it challenged how I had been taught to think about language. Instead of conceiving of language as an idealized, bounded system, as the theory in which I was trained would have it, I came to see (for my purposes) a more useful emic conception of language as an open system, continually being transformed by its users within a specific spatial-temporal context and by its internal self-organizing dynamics. When conceiving of language thusly, there was no need to posit an innate language organ, a competence-performance distinction or preformationism. These constructs gave way to ecological thinking, featuring contextualized meaning-making, interconnected multilevel systems, environmental affordances, non-linearity, unfinalizability, historicity and, above all, emergentism. CDST is a theory of and for our times because it is fundamentally a nonreductionist theory of change. As such, it is especially useful to those interested in language use/development/learning/teaching/evolution. While some social scientists and humanists might object to CDST because of its origin in the physical sciences, CDST can be thought of as metatheory, which is transdisciplinary and which can inform thinking about symbolic systems as well as natural ones.
(2) What is your notion of meaning/meaning-making?

Jan Blommaert:
Meaning in its traditional (linguistic) sense is one of the many effects of social (inter)action, and quite often a nonlinear one (an outcome that cannot be predicted from initial conditions). I have replaced 'meaning' almost entirely by 'effect', and I attempt to examine specific kinds of effects emerging from specific kinds of (online-offline) actions. Meaning-as-effect is grounded in (some degree of) recognizability, and this recognizability is usually not a feature of the resources we use alone, but more of the practices we deploy them in. Which is why 'yes' can mean 'no' and 'darling' can sound like a threat depending on what happens in the interaction in which these words are being used.

Gunther Kress:
The term 'meaning' points to a mediating relation between 'the world', an individual's semiotic work in making sense of that world and the always provisional 'outcome' of this process of mediation. Meaning largely refers to this third aspect, the result of bringing together an individual's semiotic resources, enabling her/him to describe and order significant phenomena of all kinds in the world. Semiotic resources are socially produced and are culturally available for members of a community, and are used in social actions. Signs are both social (given the resources drawn on) and individual (given the individuals' agency in choice from the resources, and constant remaking). Signs, the constitutive elements of meaning, are never 'used' but always newly made, as the product of ceaseless new making of meaning. In the semiotic work of sign-making, signifieds ('elements of significance') are joined with signifiers (material means apt for making signifieds evident). Signs are the material realization of socially significant phenomena - whether objects or events. They are the result of an agent's momentary material fixing and framing of immaterial semiosis. In networks of relations, signs make up the always up-to-date meaning resource of the sign-maker: both as a record of experience and action in the social world and as resources to be used in new (inter-)action.
Ofelia Garcia:
I believe that language refers to the human capacity to make meaning, and not to standardized named languages taught and legitimized in political states and schools. Meaning-making is for me the most important activity of human beings. I conceive of human beings as people who make meaning for themselves, for their lives, for the lives of others, always from their own positionality.

Meaning-making is what drives learning, not the acquisition of a standardized named language. And yet, schools create the barrier of a named language measured through standardized assessments that evaluate content achievement only through one (or two) standardized named languages. Without the barrier of this language construction, language minoritized children would be able to make meaning of art, history, math, music, science, technology, liberating their passions and creativity, without first having to prove that they can use standardized features of language.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:
Meaning emerges in the interaction between speaker/signer and listener/interpreter or reader and writer adapting the code to a particular social and material environment. In other words, it is co-constructed in use. Moreover, language learners/users have the capacity to create their own patterns and to expand the meaning-making potential of a given language, not just conform to a ready-made system. In this way, new meanings are constantly being generated. Meaning-making operates at many levels and timescales and in the interstices between (an) agent(s) and the social and material environment. In order to make meaning, a variety of resources are drawn upon beyond the language code, including gestures, posture, visage, voice prosodies, images, music, art and artifacts in the environment. Meaning-making also entails interpreting and negotiating the meaning of others. In this regard, it is important to note that speakers/signers have goals that go beyond communicating a message intelligibly, including establishing their identity. For this reason, the context of use with its immanent routines is indispensable in constraining interpretive possibilities.
(3) How do humans communicate?

Jan Blommaert:

Hymes gave us the answer a long time ago: 'use all there is to be used'. There is hardly a limit to the resources that can be turned into signs, and the range of resources thus made useful is continuously changing. This could suggest infinite creativity. I must qualify that: there is infinite creativity within sets of very strict constraints. There is the constraint of accessibility/availability of resources – not everyone has access to possibly the 'best' resources for specific forms of communication – and there is the constraint of communicability, i.e. interactionally established recognizability of signs as valid, or, if you wish, the inevitable genre-requirement of any form of communication. The latter involves uptake, and here is the most crucial constraint: we need others for us to be communicating beings.

Gunther Kress:

Human communication is an instance of social interaction; the latter is an instance of the former. Like all action, interaction is semiotic work, achieved by means of using tools: the (always individual version of the) semiotic resources of a community, as signs and sign-complexes, in social settings. The fundamental principle of human sign-making is that the signifier (a material element) is an apt means of making the signified (an element of significance for the sign-maker) materially evident. That is, signs are motivated conjunctions of signifier and signified. That principle is understood by those who interact with a sign. It enables those who engage with the sign to hypothesize about the meaning of the sign in making their new sign. Meanings made in interaction are always hypotheses; communication is always 'interpretation'. The material realization of signs depends on the social characteristics of the occasion of interaction; in another part it depends on physiological/biological factors (the senses, for instance) interacting with the materials used in sign-making. Both social and physiological factors shape what materials can and will be used in the making of new semiotic resources as signs, and hence for communication. The principles of sign-making apply to all modes, leading to a move away from the concept of 'language' as a quasi portmanteau term. 'Language' gives way to the concept of 'mode': as a socially shaped semiotic resource based on the 'affordances' of specific material means, elaborated to give expression to the community's (and with that the individual's) social-semiotic requirements – more or less developed.

(As an aside: The principle of sign-making used here is likely to be shared by all mammalian species.)
Ofelia García:

Human communication always entails an interaction between speaker and hearer. Human beings select an assemblage of signs (linguistic and multimodal) that they believe give the hearers the best 'hints' of what is their intended meaning. These signs are sometimes linguistic (words, phonology, morphology) and sometimes multimodal (gestures, visuals, clothing, technology), and they often occur as an assemblage of signs. The intended hearer(s) of the message may or may not match the meaning of the message to that intended by the speaker. Sometimes, the listener works at making meaning because they are interested in what the speaker has to say. They ask for repetitions, other signs, other media, other tools. Other times, however, the listener simply does not want to listen to the message being given by the speaker because they hold the speaker in low regard because of the speakers' race, gender, socioeconomic status, country of origin, bilingualism and other social markers. In those cases, the speaker is often regarded as the culprit in the breakdown of communication, although it is the listener who creates it by assigning the body of the speaker negative characteristics that go beyond linguistic or multimodal signs.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:

CDST is a relational theory; it focuses on what goes on between and among components of a system and systems themselves. Interlocutors in an interaction are not autonomous, but are part of a larger, coupled system. In a coupled system, individuals do not function independently since each affects the other continuously linguistically, physically (e.g. kinaesthetic mirroring), emotionally and ideationally as the interaction unfolds. This dynamic and reciprocal process is what CDST researchers call 'co-adaptation'. As interlocutors convergently or divergently adapt to one another while communicating, the semiotic resources of each are altered, and some novel shared meaning can be distributed in a way that may not be instituted with either alone. Thus, interlocutors come to an interaction with both shared and different ontogenetic histories and move on from the interaction changed in some way by participating in it. So, interlocutors and their semiotic resources both reflexively shape and are shaped by their communication.
(4) What is language?

Jan Blommaert:

It stands for just one of the many resources that can be deployed in social interaction. And of all these resources, it is the most overrated one. It is overrated because popular beliefs equate ‘communication’ and ‘language’, and so attribute way too much weight to the role of language (as ‘correct’ mapping of form over denotational content) in meaning-making. Which is why, for instance, we keep bumping into the idea that multilingualism might be detrimental to social cohesion because people ‘can’t communicate unless they share a language’. People have to share a mutually ratified set of communicative resources, and if no such resources are readily available, they will construct them ad hoc. How to change these views? By explaining (over and over again) to the people around you how they effectively communicate, here and now.

Gunther Kress:

‘Language’ is the (still) dominant English word to name — broadly and vaguely — the resources of speech and writing regarded as the two major means for dealing with meaning: in ‘naming’ and in (inter-)action. The word serves as a ubiquitous metaphor for many means, kinds and instances of communication, and for naming a wide range of such phenomena. In much academic work, the profound differences of speech and writing — whether in societies using an alphabet and particularly so in societies using different script systems — are not in focus. Without going far afield, signing raises the question of how it is to be regarded. Should the metaphor ‘language’ be used — as in ‘sign language’ — or should, given the entirely distinct materiality of gesture, and its instantiation both temporally and spatially, signing be treated as a distinct cultural/semiotic resource for representation and communication? The term ‘mode’ supplies an answer. ‘Mode’ encompasses all the semiotic features required to function as a full means of communication in a given society. This makes it possible to give ‘recognition’ to means of making meaning that have hitherto often been treated as marginal — as the ‘extra-linguistic’, the ‘tacit’, etc. That has profound political consequences, most immediately in educational settings. It also makes it unremarkable to deal with societies where speech and ‘script’ are not related in terms of the one providing a means of ‘transcription’ for the other. It does lead to the requirement to investigate the distinct and different affordances of each mode, and the means for the ‘translation’ of meaning across modes.
As I said before, language refers to the human capacity to make meaning and the deployment of those practices. It is a semiotic capacity that is widely distributed. It is a capacity that grows in the intimacy of family who want to communicate with an infant or child, in friendships and relationships that are developed for companionship, support and alliances.

Language is made up of what can be defined as linguistic signs – features (phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax) developed in social interaction with others, thus, a practice. Language is also made up of other semiotic signs, such as gestures, clothing, the body itself, etc. It is the deployment of this semiotic system that enables communication.

The semiotic system that is language has been truncated in schools so that multimodal features are considered ‘scaffold’ or support. In school, the only system that matters is a restricted linguistic system that excludes all multimodal features and all linguistic features not considered as making up a ‘standard academic language’. This means the rejection of all linguistic features that are not considered part of the ‘named language(s)’ of instruction.

Language is a complex adaptive system. It is complex in that novel patterns emerge from the iterative interactions of its users. It is adaptive because its speakers rely on past experiences and present contingencies to continually (re)shape their repertoires. Thus, language is both a heterogeneous social practice that is built bottom up from the interactions of its diverse users, while at the same time being entrained by its historical trajectory and present sociocultural norms. This combination results in a continuous cycle of activity, propelled by reciprocal causality and fractal recursivity. Without entrainment, mutual intelligibility would be impossible; nonetheless, local use of language remains fluid and adaptable to be molded in accordance with users’ intentions. Adopting a complexity perspective requires us to take seriously the interconnectedness of system components within and across nested levels and scales, as well as how they interconnect with the system’s context. Finally, language is autopoietic, and as such, complexity theorists have adopted the term ‘languaging’ from enactivism to refer to both the endogenous and exogenous dynamics of bringing forth meaning in continuous becoming.
What value do you place on culture in your thinking?

Jan Blommaert:
What does 'culture' actually mean in this question? In my current thinking, 'culture' in any traditional understanding of it has very little place. It can be used to describe the specific sets of microhegemonies valid and operating within a community of people engaging in specific forms of social action. 'Culture', there, would just be shorthand for the stuff that makes such forms of action mutually and collectively understandable.

Gunther Kress:
In social semiotics, 'the social' is seen as the domain of action in fields of power by members of a social group. Their actions and interactions both rely on and produce cultural/semiotic resources as tools. These objects/entities, values, practices are constantly produced and changed in action and interaction. As an interconnected whole, these resources can be treated as constituting 'culture', as the term for an encompassing resource whose elements are available for use in ceaseless social action and interaction. In this view, culture (with its constituent elements) is the product of social actions; it shows the traces of actors and their actions and the environments that shaped the resources. The socially made elements – objects, processes, phenomena and values – in their turn shape those who use them in ceaseless actions and interactions, in which the elements and hence 'the culture' are both shaped and transformed, in line with the interests, requirements, demands of those who are acting and interacting.
Ofelia Garcia:
Anthropologists have long talked about cultural practices rather than simply culture as an autonomous and bounded concept. All cultures are a product of what the Cuban ethnologist in the 1940s called 'transculturación'. The process of transculturación refers to the complex transformation of cultural practices that occurs through colonialism and nation-state formations. My interest in transculturación as process has much impacted my interest in translanguaging. Transculturación is transmitted through language - language transformed from an autonomous and bounded named language to the practices that people have that go beyond named languages and that are products of colonialism and nation-state formations. Thus, for me, it was the concept of transculturación that liberated me from traditional definitions of language and that led me to translanguaging.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:
As with language, cultural practices emerge from the interactions of members who co-orient within a shared spatial-temporal context, metaphoric or actual. However, despite the co-orientation, culture is neither homogeneous nor static, but is rather expressed through the lived experience of its diverse members. Furthermore, as with language, the emergence of new cultural practices is constrained by the existing levels in the ecosystem. Although it is natural to perceive the levels hierarchically, language and culture are enjoined in a heterarchical relationship, a languaculture (Agar, 1994), so that mutual influence and causal relations flow in all directions. In any case, moving within and from one level to another is not simply a matter of transfer because such movement always results in a transformation. Note also that CDS theorists speak of cultural practices, giving culture a more dynamic construal.
(6) How do you conceptualize power in your theory?

Jan Blommaert:

Every bit of online-offline research I have done or have been confronted with lately confirms the Foucaultian vision of power as normative and moralized, infinitely fractal, reflexive and visible only after having executed it. Foucault spoke of the care of the self, the fact that we subject ourselves to elaborate procedures of normative control and micro-regimentation. In the online world, this has now been complemented with the care of the selfie: infinitely detailed normative complexes (microhegemonies) are made available for the regimenting of almost every aspect of online self-presentation. Let it be said in this context that power, thus understood, is dialogical and operates, notably, through ratification by others.

Gunther Kress:

Social interaction takes place in environments marked by differences of many kinds: physical, social, cultural. All these differences can potentially be used as indicators of power. Every community has histories of valuations of such difference; they tend to become solidified and form the basis — at the least a consideration — to be potentials for action or to limit potentials for action. In social action and interaction such knowledge about possibilities for inhibitions on action informs all instances of sign-making. That means that in sign-making, as well as attending to the aptness of the relation of signified and signifier, sign-makers need to attend to indicating, in every sign, the power relations in instances of interaction as communication. These indicators index who interacts with whom, and under what conditions. Power is central everywhere in sign-making and therefore in (inter)action/communication.
Ofelia Garcia:

Power is central to my understandings of language. Power is exerted by armies and navies, but also by authoritative bodies and texts such as academias, dictionaries and grammars, and institutions like schools. As a Latina, I am especially interested in making visible the role that language played in the process of colonization of Latin America, of the formation of Latin American republics, of the imperialism of the US in expanding its borders to the south and west, and of US capitalism that facilitates the emigration of Latinx workers while criminalizing it so that they remain docile bodies. Power is the meollo of the question for those of us who live as Latinx bilinguals in what José Martí, the Cuban writer and patriot, called 'el monstruo'. The power of English over Spanish, and of Spanish over the languages spoken by native Americans and enslaved Africans and Chinese immigrants in Latin America, and especially the power of English monolingualism or Spanish monolingualism over the bilingualism of all Americans (North and South) has been foremost in my work.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:

Power relates to choice. Having power is being able to make choices and accessing the resources to exercise them. Granting choices or denying them may stereotypically be seen as acts being imposed top-down, but in fact, in a complex system, power-wielding is not unidirectional. Thus, if one wanted to seek social change, one would need to recognize that any action is tied into a web of connections that can influence and constrain it. For example, deciding to implement a specific educational policy may not yield the anticipated results because the classroom is not insulated from the influence of the greater sociopolitical dynamics and inequities. Therefore, to effect change, a systems-level strategy is needed. Despite systems consisting of many levels, the point of leverage or control parameter to change them may be simple – the tipping point in CDST terms. Finally, with human interventions intent on redressing power imbalances, no matter how well-intentioned, CDST warns social change agents to be mindful of the indirect consequences of their actions, also known as the law of unintended consequences.
(7) What is the relationship of individual agency and society?

**Jan Blommaert:**
Individual agency is an ‘accent’, a small inflection, of largely formatted moralized behavioral templates. I combine several sources here: Foucault (the individual as an effect, an artifact of power), Mead (individuals as the residue of the totality of social interactions they were involved in) and Garfinkel (individuals as concretely configured outcomes of social action). The fact that agency is ‘accent’ implies that its range is small, but not that it is unimportant. In actual fact, we engage with others largely through formats, but the actual ways in which we engage with actual individuals is a factor of their specific ‘accents’ (which is why we like certain colleagues and dislike some others, while most of our lives are shared with them, engaging in pretty well-formatted actions).

**Gunther Kress:**
Culture provides the resources for acting and interacting in the social world. In ‘use’ there is the dual process of the resources shaping those who use them in a likeness of those who had produced the resources; and of the reshaping of resources in relation to the interests, purposes of the present user. ‘Social’ and ‘individual’ aspects are combined. Members of a ‘society’ produce the cultural/semiotic resources. The use of the resource happens in always new situations, with always new purposes arising from a user’s assessment of what is to be done. In the always new environments of interaction the user, in reshaping the resources is constantly reshaping the social. Socially shaped individuals are ceaselessly agentive in reshaping the social.
Ofelia García:

Individual agency is important for all. But structural societal factors limit individual agency for some who are considered the Other — women, transgender people, black and brown people, colonized and poor people. The Other have been constructed as not human or subhuman or plain inferior. Granting them a sense of individual agency when society has limited their real opportunities only victimizes them further and exacerbates their sense of inadequacy and insecurity. Transformations can only occur when societal barriers are removed. Giving the Other a sense of self-worth is important. This gives the Other the agency to speak, to use language. But if the hearer is not ready to listen, then raising the voices of the Other just leads to an impasse, a wall that is not only seen, but also heard as a wall that is impenetrable.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:

The choices we make as individuals cannot help but be influenced by our social embeddedness. In reciprocal fashion, we can also initiate change in society. Agency is not inhered in individuals, but is rather contingent and interpellated from the dynamic interaction of multiple factors at micro, meso and macro levels of the complex sociocultural system. In a word, agency is emergent.

The sociocultural system clearly has an impact on how agents' lives unfold (e.g. the initial conditions of a system are very important in CDST); nevertheless, it is important to remember that because complex systems are open systems, they are not fully determined by extant conditions. Agents have the option to reframe their relationship to the sociocultural context. It is also possible for agents to go beyond reproducing initial conditions (which are continually being updated) and for the system to develop along alternate trajectories. Thus, while agency in a complex system might be constrained by its history, it is not fully determined by it.
(9) What are the most crucial issues to be investigated today?

Jan Blommaert:
Inequality. By analytically expanding the range of communicative resources we intend to investigate, we necessarily find more objects of potential and effective inequality beyond 'language' in the sense used, e.g. in sociolinguistic work on minority languages. Think, for instance, of all that is required to successfully launch an online petition for the removal of a corrupt bureaucrat in the South of China: such a complex online action is only 'simple' and 'easy' for those who have full access to the totality of the resources required for it – including knowledge and experience. This is one of the reasons why I tend to attach great importance to online-offline sites as informal learning environments, where such resources are being made available, distributed, learned and practiced.

Gunther Kress:
The contemporary 'social' is marked by instability, provisionality and fragmentation. The effect of the contemporary (so-called 'social') media is to act as amplifiers of these current dis-integrative factors. For me, with aspirations to act as an intellectual, it seems essential to ask what I as an academic might do to act against tendencies that I see as deleterious and harmful to the vast majority. Qua academic, I can attempt to provide descriptive accounts of what seem to be emergent social configurations, new tasks and the new requirements. I can attempt to describe the contemporary social/semiotic landscape and its technologies: both in their relation to and as mirrors of the social. Qua intellectual, I attempt to provide new terminology, new ‘namings’ (whether in terms of disciplines or within disciplines), so as to get beyond current constraints for thinking. I attempt to move beyond former paradigms of response to unease with the social – as expressed in backward facing terms such as ‘critique’, moving rather to a prospective paradigm such as ‘Design’. At the least, it suggests that I am able to give shape to my conceptions, and put them into the world as counters to current trends.
Ofelia García:
Language performances in schools are most often evaluated through assessments that measure, above all, features of a standardized named language. This means that students who language differently are always perceived as deficient. For me then, the most important issue right now is for researchers to document the ways in which judgments made with standardized assessments provide the basis for the exclusion of many from educational and societal opportunities. Consequential validity, how different groups fare in the assessment, must substitute for reliability as the most important measure of confidence in assessment. Transforming the sorting mechanism that schooling through language assessment has become is for me the most important challenge for language researchers today.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:
Given what I have just written in my answer to Question 8, I would say that a crucial issue is how to counter the widespread misunderstanding of languages and dialects today. I have in mind the monolingual bias, the standard language/dialect ideology, the individuation of languages and the belief that there is an endpoint to language and to language learning that coincides with native speaker norms and use. Such ideologies can have serious consequences for people’s lives, disempowering individuals and groups, widening extant disparities, and can more generally undermine moves toward democracies.
(10) How do you imagine the others' bricolage fit with your thinking?

Jan Blommaert:

Let me make two preliminary points. (1) There are obvious and very deep similarities between what I argued and what my three interlocutors argued, for all three have tremendously influenced and inspired my own development. With Ofelia, I share the lifelong commitment to sociolinguistic inequality as a key issue in everything we do; with Diane, I share the awareness of the destabilizing effects of a complexity perspective, along with the commitment to turn them into a pedagogical tool with practical implications; from close collaboration with Gunther, I learned the overrated nature of 'language' as just one set of semiotic resources among many, as well as the emphasis of meaning as an effect of practice rather than as activated latent potential. (2) For the reader: the similarities between the different views are scattered over different answers. My answer to one question converges with my interlocutors' answers to different questions.

But the attentive reader will have soon sensed that all of us share a number of things: (a) most critically: an interaction-focused view of meaning-making, i.e. the view that meaning emerges out of social practices in which people draw on differentially (and unequally) distributed semiotic resources; (b) a clear awareness of how, as an effect of (a), power can never be elided from the analysis of meaning-making; (c) and neither can the complexity of actual meaning-making be reduced by invoking artefactualized notions of 'language' in its traditional sense. In fact, it is this ideological conception of 'language' that very often causes the forms of social inequality we all find extraordinarily important. Finally, (d) all of us share an acute awareness of profound social change affecting, fundamentally, our imagination of social life and inviting (or demanding) continual theoretical adjustment.

Gunther Kress:

The fundamental agreement about academic/political projects seems to me the most significant aspect here. The differences arise, I think, from different positions in the social/political and hence academic world, where different concerns are, inevitably, in focus. In terms of theories, there is broad agreement about the social as dynamic, as the site, inevitably of power, all of which requires theories to mirror that dynamism and the workings of power in their categories and relations.

As far as the book is concerned, and its possible future aims, this seems to me to provide a very good starting point for a - long and detailed - discussion, with the aim, perhaps of finding a way through the contemporary terminological morass.
Ofelia García:

In reading the bricolage, I am reminded that indeed there is no view from nowhere. My gaze over meaning and language stems from my positionality as a US Latina scholar. In the 1970s, as a young developing scholar, I was nurtured by two trends that I have held alongside each other in a perpetual heterarchy. As the magical realism of Latin American novelists lifted me from my particular circumstances, the struggles over civil rights kept me grounded. Educationally, I was immersed in semiotics to do literary analysis with one mentor, the Argentinean Angela Dellepiane, but I used semiotics to open up the descriptions of language in society inspired by my other mentor, the Yiddish-speaking Joshua A. Fishman. I have repeatedly taken up the ideas of Kress, Blommaert and Larsen-Freeman as I have explored and reformulated my own meanings, and as others take them up and transform them some more. Our understandings are nested, imbricated, provisional, emergent, but pointing differently. All point to a dynamism beyond borders, although even when all of us work across chronotopes and scales, the terrain is different. Kress’ words in the bricolage focus on going beyond modes; Blommaert on going beyond the normative control of language; Larsen-Freeman on the complexity of language learning. I would say that mine reaches toward theirs, but is pulled by my work in schools, a normative institution that continues to ignore the reformulation of language, modes and language learners that make up the multiple meanings in this bricolage.

Diane Larsen-Freeman:

Although we come from different perspectives and employ different discourses, it seems to me that there are some common themes in our answers. We share a post-structural and social orientation to language and its use. We give importance to semiotic resources, multimodality, language practices and criticality. Two of us focus more on education, one on semiotics and the other of us more on sociolinguistics, but we all have in common calling for a departure from traditional views of language, and we share a commitment to social justice.
As variously pointed out in all four answers to the last question, readers will easily see for themselves the many points of contact and commonalities among these four thinkers, each with their different language, points of departure, foci and interests. In what follows, we would like to offer some possible reading prompts for tracing sharedness among, through, within and behind/beyond differences in the bricolage.

Their languages are different, but similar concerns resound across the four voices: a concern for a time of profound social change, which requires new/further thinking; a concern for studying communicative phenomena (differently focused as semiosis, meaning-making, interaction, languaging and/or language learning) as deeply rooted in, reflecting and shaping society; a concern for finding new ways of theorizing, describing and explaining these phenomena as practices, beyond the fixities of previous frameworks and accounts; a concern for the complexities of human lives (in their profoundly relational, but also material and bodily nature), as well as a concern for where forms of social livings are heading today; which calls forth a concern for power and inequalities, and a concern for contributing intellectually to positive change.

Differences can be spotted too, in standpoints, trajectories, foci and interests. As an example, communication practices and resources can be conceived of in terms of ‘use’, of ‘action’ or of ‘making’; language can be thought of as being multimodal itself (encompassing gestures and clothing, for example) or as one (overrated) semiotic resource out of many, or else as one artificial/ideological label for partially identifying/constraining meaning-making, out of all its possible realizations. Interests may lie (more) in observing social interaction as a means to understanding societies, or (more) in liberating language conceptions and teaching from ideologies that (re)produce inequalities. Terminological differences reveal different standpoints, in using ‘systems’ or ‘relations’; ‘actions’ and ‘effects’ or ‘meaning’ and ‘interpretation’; ‘minoritized people’, ‘social groups’ or ‘communities’, for example. Scattered throughout the answers, these different takes, directions and nuances seem to provide possibilities for opening a discussion. Dynamic openness does not seem to be only a key term in one perspective here, but also a shared intellectual stance, in what Diane terms as a ‘common calling for a departure from traditional views’, and a profound commitment to go ‘beyond’ (in Ofelia’s words). Hence, differences sound to us as rather intriguing potentials for future stimuli, as they thread through a substantial political/ideal agreement for advancing thinking that
needs to problematize common (mis)conceptions on language and communication, to adequately account for a time of change – and positively impact on it.

In gathering these four main theorists in linguistic ethnography, translanguaging, social semiotics and complex dynamic system theory in language, we have conceived this piece to be useful to make sense of the interconnections across different theoretical trajectories, terminologies and concepts, sensing a potential underlying sharedness beyond and behind differences, across traditional domains (sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, multimodality and language development/acquisition/learning), whose boundaries need to be crossed, as these four thinkers have shown in their theories and practices. A few keywords resound, which we find emerging across answers: complexity, dynamicity, social interaction, power, inequalities, resources for making meaning, practices, action and change. In line with what all the answers above seem to indicate, we are triggered by the idea that each of these terms/labels means something different for each of our four thinkers – and possibly has come to mean something further different after each one has met the other’s thinking, at some point in their theorizing and, eventually, while contributing to this bricolage. Embracing the dynamics between situated meaning-making and ‘recognizability’ (in Jan’s terms) involves accepting difference as coexisting with sharedness, engaging with this never linear dynamics and stemming from it to produce yet further meaning. In our thinking, this bricolage could provide readers (among which we include ourselves) with a canvass threaded with very much needed ‘ways through’ what at times may seem like a ‘terminological morass’ (in Gunther’s words); this canvass will hopefully be generative of further readings, discussions and debates.

Here, we can suggest a few possible reading paths for the bricolage: as a most immediately pragmatic one, a reading path can look for a repertoire of definitions of fundamental concepts in each of the four thinkers’ theories; the bricolage piece is indeed densely punctuated with definitions from each theoretical perspective. Another reading path can compare the four thinkers’ positions thematically, as laid out together under each question, and generate a virtual dialogue among the four of them. A further one can instead follow one individual perspective through the 10 answers, and make sense of the unfolding of her/his thinking across some fundamental thematic pillars, which provide the milestones for a distilled version of the current theorizing of the four contributors. Yet another path could possibly (re)trace each of the four thinkers’ theorizing into and across the empirical analyses of the other chapters in this volume,
all of which, to different extents and in different ways, embody each of them, and their underlying stance for approaching the investigation of communication today. We would particularly like to add two other, more imaginative, reading paths, which from the space of the pages of this bricolage expand into time. One reading path can ask how these answers—and emerging keywords—would have possibly differed had we asked them a few decades ago—and we suspect that differences would be quite a few; the answers above reserve very little or no room for concepts like ‘code’, ‘proficiency’, ‘competence’, ‘grammar’ or ‘conventions’—to name only a few terms of traditional linguistics and semiotics—which, for us, signals a point in the four’s theorizing that has reached far beyond the stage of critique, hence possibly beyond the ‘post’ of structuralism. A second imaginative reading path can ask instead how these answers can lead to formulating new questions, and hopefully foster debate and further very much needed encounters in the future.

Finally, we would be remiss not to discuss the issues we link to education because the challenges for education, educators, educational policy makers, activists and researchers are deeply entangled issues of (1) equity (and a weightier lack thereof); (2) repressive restrictions on languages, creoles, language varieties, bi- and multilingualisms; (3) an unfair distribution of material wealth, access to that wealth and access to education worldwide; and (4) repression of a free, dynamic, creative, recognized and celebrated use of all semiotic modes for learning and for educational assessment. To be sure, traces of these challenges percolate beneath the surface of our readings of the bricolage, while even more explode from our embodied activism against repressive measures of nation states (see Heller & McElhinny, 2017 for a critical exposition). That is to say, if education—its practitioners and researchers—explored what Jan calls ‘new forms of social imagination’, what Diane says is the ‘transformation’ rather than the ‘transfer’ of knowledge, what Gunther calls a learner’s ‘principled interpretations’ and if education explored the exclusionary language assessment practices with an eye to transform them into inclusive practices as Ofelia speaks of, the dynamics of teaching and learning would potentially resonate with a radical new mandate different than that which nation states construct as schooling and educational practice.

We imagine an advocacy for complex and dynamic ways of teaching and learning that might one day more fully embrace diverse semiotic repertoires, diverse ensembles of multimodality, equity and the free and creative emergence of those repertoires in ways that both address sociopolitical concerns moment-to-moment and across scaled levels and multiple discourses (Blommaert, 2010), imagined communities and
Deteriorialized, mobile and shifting educative spaces. At the same time, Diane reminds us that ‘harmful ideologies’ circulate in and through education as well as ‘the inert knowledge problem’, which concern us in that they lead us to think about the daily inequities that standards and norms and standardized tests construct (Ofelia’s point) as they repress and erase varieties of human expression, delegitimize translanguaging and only provide spaces for a very limited multimodality in enactments of learning and their assessments. Or as Ofelia states, ‘language has been truncated in schools’, which is as untenable as the truncation of multimodal forms of expression, the negative impact of which is shown and evidenced in much of Gunther’s work. Such enactments of learning that constrict creativity and focus on very structured and narrow ways to teach and assess language and knowledge are often, sadly, still generated by and for the benefit of an elite designing and supporting educational systems across rural and urban spaces, relentlessly driven by neoliberal forces that distribute and garner material wealth in expanding socially imbalanced ways, harming humanity, flora, fauna and the planet. To carry knowledge in ‘perpetual heterarchy’ as Ofelia engages us to consider, not only leads us to think about the conclusion of this volume, our Heterarchic Commentaries, but heterarchy as a subject positioning for knowledge, for meaning-making in school and out of school and the fluidity across these spaces. That fluidity is no less an indispensable dynamic in a social justice model of education, including the semiotics of human ‘encounters and experiences’ (Buber, 1923); for throughout the bricolage (as in all chapters of this volume), humanity is conceptualized as profoundly relational. Designing education so that it is first and foremost about the dynamic, emergent, open and nonlinear relationalities of and through existence and taking risks to think freely, as Jan, Ofelia, Gunther and Diane’s thinking implies, is foundational to a radical education that struggles against narrowness, bigotry and economic inequalities.

Within the puzzling, and often worrying, fast-paced changes of today’s world, education is only one field in need of such intellectual and active engagement. Adopting such a radical stance, we believe, would be beneficial not only for and within education, teaching and learning, but for and within all domains of social interaction and social life. Hence, we might even begin to re-imagine community and the commons (Amin & Howell, 2016) through a de-centering of humanity (Pennycook, 2018), not just the de-centering of language, which does not mean overshadowing the need to struggle for social justice; quite the opposite in fact, as Bateson (1972) clearly indicated nearly half a century ago. This would be the broadest move on the ecologically dynamic pathways that open
before us, for they include epistemological and ontological questions about knowledge — and interaction — beyond the current faltering disciplines and hyphenated liminalities of cobbled together thinking, which Gunther challenges us to disturb, to rethink. Hence, as interpreters who disturb the status quo, we have continuously focused and refocused on what we know and do not know, how we know and knowing itself, which is — to our thinking — a promising futurity for dialogic exploration that we have only just begun.

References


Selected Readings

We asked each contributor to list five of their publications that they would recommend as further reading on their thinking for readers of this bricolage piece.

Jan Blommaert


Ofelia García

Thagott (eds) *The Linguistic Integration of Adult Migrants/L'intégration linguistique des migrants adultes. Some Lessons from Research/Les enseignements de la recherche* (pp. 11-26). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton. (Open access: https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/books/9783110477498/9783110477498-005/9783110477498-005.pdf. In cooperation with the Council of Europe.)


**Gunther Kress**


**Diane-Larsen Freeman**


