Migrants/refugees and digital connectivity

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Recent media and communications research shows that digital media, in particular mobile devices/smartphones, are indispensable resources to migrants at various stages of their transnational trajectories (Leurs/Smets 2018, Witteborn 2015). Research on forced migrants/refugees and digital connectivity, in particular, shows that refugees rely on digital media for a range of information, interaction and support needs.

Language use, and multilingualism in particular, has been generally overlooked or treated as a given in research on these issues outside linguistics. In sociolinguistics, the relation of migrants/diasporic groups, digital media, and multilingual practices has been examined in the framework of globalization/superdiversity (cf. Androutsopoulos 2006, Heyd 2014). However, while sociolinguistic discussions of globalization and superdiversity programmatically acknowledge the importance of digital media as enablers, or boosters, of transnational (forced or voluntary) mobility (e.g. Blommaert / Rampton 2011), empirical research that traces in detail the interplay of transnational mobility, mobile devices, and linguistic repertoires is still scarce, no doubt also due to fieldwork and ethical challenges in this field (Androutsopoulos/Juffermans 2014, Tagg/Lyons 2017).

In this panel we aim to explore sociolinguistic dimensions of contemporary digital connectivity among migrants and refugees. We approach digital connectivity from a wide angle, emphasizing its interrelation to institutional or community-based communicative practices, the merge of on- and offline activities, and the asymmetric access to digital literacy in social groups and countries. Contributors empirically examine the interplay of linguistic repertoires, media affordances, institutional regimes and community affiliations. Topics include the relationship of digital connectivity and language practices among migrants/refugees from the viewpoint of linguistic repertoire theory (e.g. Busch 2017) and in relation to the construction of identities, refuge trajectories, institutional regimes (e.g. asylum seeking procedures), migrant and diasporic conviviality, digital translanguaging, and informal language learning.

Keywords: migrants, asylum seekers, digital media, connectivity, mobility

1. Revisiting Social Network Analysis

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In the late 1980s, a team of sociolinguists in Newcastle, UK, carried out a series of studies examining the multilingual practices in the Chinese community with Hong Kong connections in the North East of England as a focal point (e.g. Li Wei, 1994). We discovered what seemed to be a rather rapid intergenerational language shift in the community and applied Social Network Analysis (SNA) to explain the patterns of this shift. We further argued that there were network specific interactional patterns in terms of the amount and type of code-switching between Cantonese and English by different generations of Chinese community (Li, Milroy and Pong, 1992; Milroy and Li, 1995). Later on we applied SNA to studying the British-born Chinese children's learning and use of Cantonese and English (2002) and found it a useful tool in understanding variations between individual speakers. Advancement in digital technologies has brought physically dispersed migrants socially closer. The role of social media in language maintenance and language shift (LMLS) therefore requires serious consideration. Moreover, a new type of transnationalism is emerging, building on a diasporic imagination of the community in the 21st century. In this paper, we propose a different approach to SNA that focuses more on individuals' variable behaviours in different contexts as well as the role of digital social media in facilitating promoting multilingual practices, combining quantitative analysis with digital ethnography. Using new data from Chinese-speaking families in Britain and how they interact digitally with their relatives, friends and contacts in different parts of the world during COVID-19, we argue that the impact of social networking needs to be an integral part of SNA of multilingual practices, as it highlights the contribution of social networking to the emerging new transnationalism.

Keywords: *social networking; Social Network Analysis, Chinese, multilingualism, new transnationalism, COVID-19*

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2. Digitized migrant identity construction

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Prof. Lars Hinrichs

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Prof. Amelia Tseng

American University

Diasporic identities are constructed on multiple scales (Blommaert 2007), as social meanings are circulated, re-indexicalized, and re-centered locally and transnationally; as migrants move through space and time, managing connections and conviviality between home and host societies in accordance with the affordances of the media within their individual and collective histories of migration.

We compare examples of mediated linguistic identity practices in migrants from two diasporas to examine how sociability and identity practices within comparable technological allowances are affected by differing migratory histories and multilingual repertoires. Media sociability practices among new diasporic migrants must be understood within the totality of their sociohistoric contexts and particularities of their linguistic repertoires as well as the affordances of communicative technology.

Jamaican linguistic performances on YouTube are an influential aspect of diasporic identity work. These constructions draw heavily on transnationally-circulated and recontextualized intertextual templates. Meanwhile, mediatized Chinese Peruvian identity construction has become important in sociability/identity among migrants' descendants in Peru, but has a more constrained online presence than the Jamaican examples in general and abroad. In both cases, the locus of initial production is in the homeland, and homeland practices are invoked to signal and gatekeep authenticity. However, the distinct majority/minority positioning of the two groups within their home countries and the notion of "where is home" affects their diasporic reach and identity impact, as do the differences between multilingual/multi-varietal repertoires, as well as differences between the two groups' commercialized cultural capital in diaspora.

 Keywords: *Diaspora, identity, Patois, Sankuay, YouTube*

3. Mobile messaging and intersemiotic

Dr. Agnieszka Lyons
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Dr. Caroline Tagg
The Open University UK

As a platform for chronotopic negotiations, mobile messaging enables migrants to share physical contextual information and negotiate proximity and distance from cultural affiliation with home and host countries (Lyons/Tagg 2019). Used to establish new and maintain existing social connections, mobile messaging plays a vital role in migrants' potential for connectivity, both within the host country and transnationally, and continuity of practices across time.

Based on analysis of ethnographic data from a large AHRC-funded project Translation and Translanguaging, we explore ways in which groups of migrants draw on jointly assembled semiotic repertoires (Tagg/Lyons forthcoming), affordances and constraints of the digital space (Androutsopoulos 2019), as well as cultural knowledge and associations, to establish common ground and an interpretative framework for engaging in ensuing offline encounters. We show how interactants' offline contexts are brought into their interactions to facilitate perceptual alignment, how particular types of cultural knowledge are triggered, diversities highlighted and resources associated with distinct languages unpacked and repackaged in processes of intersemiotic translanguaging.

The talk demonstrates connections between migrants' offline realities, relationships, and shared heritage, with shifting social relationships and identities reflected, enabled and constrained by the choice of varied semiotic resources. We point to the role of group messaging in cultural encounters seen through a post-digital lens which posits the digital not as new and disruptive but as a ubiquitous accepted part of everyday social connectivity.

Keywords: *connectivity, intersemiotic translanguaging, framing, mobile messaging, online/offline interplay*

4. Migrant mobilities

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Digital communication is by now widely recognized as a central domain of investigation to understand migrant's linguistic repertoires and practices and the many ways in which they connect to different communities and establish their identities. Such focus, which was already theorized in sociolinguistic work on superdiversity and globalization (cfr. Blommaert and Rampton 2011), is also apparent in recent literature on "digital diasporas" (see Afeworki 2018 , Androutsopoulos & Juffermans 2016, Heyd & Honkanen 2015, Leurs 2015) and on "transidiomatic practices" (Jacquemet, 2018). However, studies of digital communication among migrants and/or refugees are still scarce and they rarely target language practices among migrants and members of local communities. This is the focus of our paper. In this paper we make the argument that research on multilingual, superdiverse mobile youth requires an understanding of networked communication that goes beyond the categories of community membership currently used in both diaspora studies and studies focused on social media. Indeed, we argue that neither the concept of "diaspora" nor the different types of communities described variously as "intradiverse", "light" "of practice" and so forth are able to capture the complexity of networks that young migrants are shown to construct online. Data from this paper come from an ethnographic project targeting the communication processes and identities negotiations of unaccompanied minors enrolled in an Italian language school in Sicily. We adopted a virtual ethnography approach (Hine, 2013), based on long term observation of posts and exchanges taking place on the Facebook walls of migrant youth followed by interviews focusing on their use of the media and their linguistic choices.

Keywords: *migrants, mobility, social media, superdiversity, youth language*

5. Digital media as chronotopic enablers in Syrian migrants' political activism

Prof. Francesco L. Sinatora

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When the Syrian uprising sparked in 2011, activists re-organized their linguistic practices on social media to emerge in political discourse, changing their repertoire from a mixture of Arabic and English multimodal texts to Arabic only (Author 2019). Between 2012 and 2016, they migrated from Syria to neighboring countries first and to Europe later. In this paper I analyze the social media practices of three of these migrants between 2017 and 2019 through the notion of "chronotopic identities" (Blommaert and De Fina 2019). Despite their increased mobility and expanded offline multilingual repertoire, findings show that their political online practices, including Facebook status updates, mobile video recordings of activism performances uploaded on Facebook and online petitions, have remained in Arabic. I envision these practices as chronotopic fragments triggered by sociopolitical events, such as the 2019 anti-government protests in Egypt, through which dissidents anchor themselves to the 2011 uprising. Building on the link between new technologies and language in globalized communication (Al Zidjaly and Gordon 2012; Androutsopoulos and Staehr 2018; Blommaert 2017), this paper shows how digital technologies function as chronotopic enablers facilitating the emergence of migrant political identities and repertoires.

Keywords: *Arabic, chronotopes, digital media, political activism, Syrian migrants*

6. Smartphone-based language practices among refugees

Prof. Jannis Androutsopoulos
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Smartphones are indispensable companion to forced migrants/refugees, who rely almost exclusively on mobile digital devices and Internet access for information management and networking, to stay in touch with members of their transnational communities and to gain orientation in new countries of transit mobility or residence (Leurs/Smets 2018, Witteborn 2015). Based on an ethnographic pilot study carried out in Hamburg in 2017/18, this paper explores the relationship between smartphone usage and multilingual practices in a refugee residence. It builds on the notion of 'mediational repertoires', i.e. patterned co-selections of linguistic resources and media channels for interaction (with various types of interlocutors) and interactivity (e.g. information-seeking online; Lexander/Androutsopoulos 2019). Data was collected among refugees from Syria and Afghanistan who arrived in Germany since 2015, including nine semi-directed interviews, ethnographic field notes and video demonstrations of smartphone usage by some of the informants. The analysis focuses on two points: First, a comparison of mediational repertoires in two families sheds light on how generation and digital literacy relate to the informants' mediational repertoires. Second, insights are gained into the informants' sources and practices of smartphone-based language learning, which include smartphone apps, YouTube channels and Facebook pages that cater specifically to learners of German with Arabic or Pashto as a first language. Since many asylum seekers in Germany do not have (full) access to official language and integration courses, such opportunities are an important resource for informal language learning (cf. Chik / Ho 2017) and their role for social integration must be considered in more detail.

Keywords: *smartphone, mediational repertoire, informal language-learning*

7. Digitalization of Asylum

Prof. Xochitl Marsilli-Vargas
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University of San Francisco

Using ethnographic evidence collected in Italy and the U.S., this paper looks at the consequences of the digitalization of asylum. "Going digital" during asylum hearings has two somewhat contradictory consequences: digital technologies may speed up the process by facilitating translation and access to evidence, but they also interject additional problems of their own. This paper focuses on the problematic deployment of three such technologies: remote linguistic monitoring, machine translation, and Internet searches.

In linguistic monitoring a state-approved translator digitally supervises the asylum interview and judges the quality and semantic accuracy of the asylum seeker's onsite translator. In some cases, the monitor focuses solely on the denotational dimension of the utterances, dismissing their indexical meanings—a dismissal that is often detrimental to the asylum seeker's story.

Similarly, machine translation transforms languages into basic, purely functional, and putatively neutral bits of information—but as applied to asylum hearings, it produces a syncopated, rushed, disrupted conversational flow, hurting witnesses' capacity for impression management and their credibility.

Finally, the ability to look up names through search engines can provide a quick way to corroborate asylum claimants' stories, but can also exacerbate the tendency of judges to focus on proper names in their examination, thus transforming the hearing into a quiz show where claimants are judged by their ability to come up with the correct name.

The recourse to digital technologies may not only fail to disambiguate the complex heteroglossic nature of asylum hearings, but these power technologies may become weapons in the hands of immigration bureaucrats, eager to implement the increasingly restrictive policies of their nation-states. In the techno-political environment of the asylum hearing, people in the position of authority are adding digital technologies to the bureaucratic kit used to build walls (physical and digital) and impede geographical mobility.

8. On being trapped into the matrix of suspicion

Prof. Massimiliano Spotti
Tilburg

The work on asylum seekers and on the notion of *scaling* has been the empirical basis for sociolinguistic notions like that of transidiomatic practices (Jacquemet 2005) and, more broadly, of sociolinguistic inequality related to globalization (Blommaert 2010). The core was a view of meaning making as layered and composed of different historically loaded elements *synchronized* and *crystallized* in the moment-to-moment unfolding of verbal, written and pictographic exchanges between institutional figures and the asylum-seeking applicant.

The point, back then, was that whenever human beings communicate, they deploy a variety of intertextual resources, such as topics, interlocutors, languages, accents, registers. While all of these resources were and still are simultaneously deployed, we must realize (Singh & Spotti *forthcoming*) that these elements are of *different scalar nature* – and that they, in turn, generate different *effects* in communication that result in (im)mobility of asylum applicants. However, one of the resources neglected back then, mainly due to its paucity of use in institutional encounters, was the internet and the knowledge that this infrastructure of globalization (Spotti *forthcoming*) brought with itself during asylum related institutional encounters.

Against the above, the present contribution investigates the process of identity (mis)recognition from the authorities leading to the rejection of an asylum seeking application. More specifically, the paper documents the discrepancy between the story narrated by the low-educated asylum seeking applicant and the type of factual knowledge awaited by the officials judging the truthfulness of his identity's claims. It highlights how the reported lack of factual knowledge above is product of a divergent matrix of truth than the one taken from the internet.

The contribution concludes by advancing considerations on how migratory experiences are scaled into administrative prescriptive accounts of what someone should say and how someone should name things in order to match 'web based truths' identity proofs.

Keywords: *Asylum, politics of suspicion, the internet, discourse practices, ergoic stories*