Introduction

In recent times, scholars in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics have found that language use in late modern societies is changing. Rather than assuming that homogeneity and stability represent the norm, mobility, mixing, political dynamics and historical embedding are now central concerns in the study of communication (Blommaert and Rampton 2011). As large numbers of people migrate across borders and as advances in digital technology make available a greater range of linguistic resources, so communication patterns are changing. In these conditions the notion of separate languages as bounded systems of specific linguistic resources may be insufficient for analysis of language in use and in action (Jørgensen et al. 2011). The idea of ‘a language’ therefore may be important as a social construct but it is not suited as an analytical lens through which to view language practices. In this chapter we discuss the limitations of an approach to understanding language and identity for scholars in applied linguistics that relies on the naming and separation of languages – that is, an approach that relies on the concept of multilingualism to describe the identities of speakers in the context of language contact.

There are implications of research findings into language use in contexts of superdiversity for policymakers in the areas of education, community relations, international affairs and public opinion. Cultural dynamics are intimately bound up with the negotiation and performance of the politics of identity, and the data we present in this chapter bring into question the usefulness of long-held and cherished categories such as ‘monolingual’, ‘bilingual’, ‘multilingual’, ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ as classifications of people. These groupings have influenced the organisation of practices in schools and the development of policies in educational, health and other social policy domains. Furthermore, as local, national and federal governments seek to tailor policy to the needs of individuals and groups, we argue that people’s identities be considered not in terms of apparent or visible categories, but rather as emic positions which are self-identified. Linguistic ethnography is central to achieving this local perspective. From this view, identities should be understood as shifting rather than stable and subject to contingencies of time and space. Additionally, they should be understood as responses to complex, dynamic societies in which subject positions orient to the old and the new, the permanent and the ephemeral, the local and the global, and the collective and
the individual. That is, identities are neither fixed nor unitary but are bound up with overlapping histories and are best understood through an ethnographic lens, as this examines the fine grain of local interaction in the light of these histories and social structures.

In this chapter we argue that applied linguists undertaking language and identity studies have much to learn from Bakhtin’s notion of ‘heteroglossia’. Bakhtin’s (1984) concept of heteroglossia views the utterance as socially, politically and historically ‘entangled’ with the voices of others. Adopting this perspective foregrounds the complexity of communication and identity in the contemporary world. Heteroglossia is a key approach to interrogating linguistic practice because it goes beyond analysis of the co-occurrence of languages and varieties, to focus on the coexistence of competing ideological points of view that are indexed by language in certain communicative situations (Androutsopoulos 2007).

However, we will argue that it is not sufficient to develop a theoretical orientation to language and social diversity in superdiverse contexts. We must also reflect critically on the means by which we gather evidence of complex communication patterns and the ways in which we may view those communication patterns from the perspective of their authors. There are also significant challenges in describing this complexity. Vertovec (2011: 90) calls for ‘fresh and novel ways of understanding and responding to such complex interplays’, while Blommaert et al. (2012: 9) suggest that new forms of diversity raise methodological issues that cannot be addressed by means of the ‘modernist paradigm’. In this chapter we consider the affordances and limitations of a linguistic ethnographic approach to language and identity. The chapter is organised along the following lines. The following section provides an overview of key terminology and theoretical framing that sets up the discussion of empirical data in the final section. This final and substantial segment of the chapter provides a critical reflection on how an ethnographic approach brings data and theory together and illustrates this journey through analysis of four detailed transcripts.

**Overview**

**Heteroglossia**

Sociolinguistic study of multilingualism has moved away from a view of languages as separate, bounded entities, to a view of communication in which language users employ the linguistic resources at their disposal to achieve their communicative aims as best they can (Jørgensen et al. 2011). Rather than taking the named language as the unit of analysis, Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 1) propose that ‘it is far more productive analytically to focus on the very variable ways in which linguistic features with identifiable social and cultural associations get clustered together whenever people communicate’. Makoni and Pennycook (2007) argue for an understanding of the relationships between what people believe about their language (or other people’s languages), the situated forms of talk they deploy and the material effects – social, economic, environmental – of such views and use. Recently, a number of terms have emerged, as scholars have sought to describe and analyse linguistic practices in which meaning is made using signs flexibly. These include, among others:

- Flexible bilingualism (Creese and Blackledge 2010);
- Codemeshing (Canagarajah 2011);
- Polylingual languaging (Jørgensen 2010; Madsen 2011);
- Contemporary urban vernaculars (Rampton 2011);
- Metrolingualism (Otsuji and Pennycook 2011);
Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese

- Translingual practice (Canagarajah 2013); and
- Translanguaging (García 2009; Creese and Blackledge 2011; García and Li Wei 2014).

The shared perspective represented in these various 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 (Rymes 2010) which extend across languages and varieties that have previously been associated with particular national, territorial and social groups. These terms, different from each other yet in many ways similar, represent a view of language as a social resource without clear boundaries in which the speaker is at the heart of the interaction.

Recently sociolinguists have turned to Bakhtin’s term ‘heteroglossia’ to better understand the diversity of linguistic practice in late modern societies (Blackledge and Creese 2014). Bakhtin (1981: 291) argued that language in use and in action represents ‘specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values’. That is, language points to, or ‘indexes’, a certain point of view, ideology, social class, profession or other social position. Heteroglossia is therefore not only – in fact not principally – about the simultaneous use of languages but rather refers to the coexistence of different competing points of view, whether constituted in a single national language (as Bakhtin proposed) or within the complex communicative repertoires in play in superdiverse, late modern societies. Bakhtin’s heteroglossic lens leads to a conceptualisation of language that differs quite radically from the traditional view of language (and language teaching) in applied linguistics. The application of Bakhtin’s literary theory in current studies in applied linguistics is explained through the work of contemporary scholars.

Pietikäinen and Dufva (2014) adopt the term ‘languaging’ in preference to the notion of unitary monolithic language, emphasising the notion of language as ‘doing’, ‘action’ or ‘activity’ and describing language in terms of a dynamic set of interconnecting and shifting, essentially multilingual, language practices. Heteroglossic languaging thus avoids seeing language as singular, and avoids viewing multilingualism in terms of enumeration of languages. Heteroglossia is a concept that highlights the essential variability present in all human languaging, not only in contexts traditionally seen as multilingual. Pietikäinen and Dufva (2014) argue that taking heteroglossia as a default assumption embeds a redefinition of language itself, and also reconceptualises such notions as ‘speaker’, ‘language learning’, ‘native speaker’ and the like. Madsen (2014) refers to Bakhtin’s distinction between ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces in discourse. A centripetal force draws features, structures and norms towards a central unified point, while a centrifugal force works in the opposite direction, drawing away from the central unified point towards variation in all directions. This distinction is often understood to refer to centripetal forces that result in language standardisation and centrifugal forces that result in language variation. Madsen notes, however, that both sets of forces are at work in discourse.

Bailey (2012: 508) argues that what is distinctive about heteroglossia ‘is not its reference to different kinds of linguistic signs and forms, but rather its focus on social tensions inherent in language’. The use of words in a certain way indexes particular social position(s) because these words are characteristically used by members of a specific group. Wortham (2008) similarly notes that a voice indexes a social position in the stratified world, as presupposed by stratified language. Bakhtin saw that what we talk about most are the words of others, such that our speech is overflowing with other people’s words. Any utterance, in addition to its own themes, always responds in one form or another to others’ utterances that precede it; speech inevitably becomes the arena where viewpoints, worldviews, trends and theories encounter each other.
Bailey (2012: 504) summarises heteroglossia as ‘the simultaneous use of different kinds of forms or signs, and the tensions and conflicts among those signs, on the sociohistorical associations they carry with them’.

These arguments have significant repercussions for applied linguistics. For example, the intensely social and constructed approaches these authors develop clash significantly with much cognitive and psycholinguistic research and their ‘within’ approaches to understanding language acquisition. In much of the SLA paradigm the human brain is conceptualised as dealing with languages as discrete systems, which researchers subsequently go on to measure in terms of proficiency judged against an idealised native speaker. Such approaches are not interested in the complexity of the social context, social relations and the array of sign types in use. A heteroglossic lens also has significant implications in terms of pedagogy and the L1/L2 divide. For many years scholarship in communicative language teaching, particularly in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL), has argued that the target language and the first language of the language learner (viewed as having a distinct L1) should be kept separate. However, this perception is being increasingly questioned by a range of scholars. Although these issues are significant in the field of applied linguistics, our focus here is on heteroglossia, identity and ethnography rather than specifically on pedagogy or different disciplinary perspectives. For a very helpful overview of these issues see Jørgensen and Møller (2014).

What we propose is an analytic gaze that takes as its focus speakers as social actors deploying heteroglossic linguistic resources to negotiate the social world. Such an analytic gaze ‘encourages us to interpret the meanings of talk in terms of the social worlds, past and present, of which words are part-and-parcel, rather than in terms of formal systems, such as “languages”, that can veil actual speakers, uses, and contexts’ (Bailey 2012: 502).

**Heteroglossia and identity**

Riley (2007) points to an increasing weight of interdisciplinary evidence that identity is socially constructed and that our sense of self can only emerge as the result of communicative interaction with others; the chapters in this book reinforce this point. Blommaert and Varis (2013: 146) have developed a four-tiered framework for investigating complex and dynamic identity processes, as follows:

1. Identity discourses and practices can be described as discursive orientations towards sets of features viewed as emblematic of particular identities. That is, through our repertoires we take positions in relation to stereotypical identities. This positioning is dynamic, as we at times affiliate with these identities and at times distance ourselves.
2. These features are not randomly distributed in a free-for-all, but are more often presented in specific arrangements and configurations. (We illustrate this below when heavily normative classroom discourse patterns are used by the teacher to play creatively with language and identity positioning.)
3. One has to have enough of the emblematic features in order to be ratified as an authentic member of an identity category, which means that some social actors are held to be inauthentic and lacking legitimacy if the right constellation is not evident.
4. These processes involve conflict and contestation, and are highly dynamic: configurations of features and criteria of authentic membership or belonging can be adjusted, reinvented and amended.
Emblematic features include the way people speak, the way they text (in SMS messages), the way they update their Facebook profile, the way they dress, the food they eat, the beverage they prefer, the music they listen to, the films they enjoy, the novels they read, and so on. Judgements about whether a person has (or performs) enough of the requisite emblematic templates to be accepted as, or endowed with, membership of a particular identity or group is highly nuanced and not always negotiable (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). Some may not have access to the necessary resources, while others may be viewed as fake members of an identity category. Moreover, it is likely that in picking our way through the complex and dynamic processes of identity negotiation, we develop a heteroglossic ‘identity repertoire’ (Blommaert and Varis 2013: 157) which enables us to adapt to the contingencies of social life. In this conception of identity, emblematic features are empirically observable and can be investigated ethnographically. Emblems of identity are not merely psychological, but are corporeal and performed as practice. This is true of the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the sport we play, and so on. It is also true of the way in which we deploy heteroglossic linguistic resources. Our accents, vocabulary and grammar are material resources that index our individual histories and trajectories.

Gal (2006) points out that in Europe a new elite of multilingual speakers of, for example, French, German and English sustains a breadth of linguistic repertoires that transcends national boundaries. For these elite groups, ethnolinguistic identity may be only an occasional issue. But for multilingual speakers of languages with lower status, language issues are likely to be more salient as they negotiate identities often from relatively powerless positions. Language ideologies are neither simple nor monolithic, however. Notwithstanding the argument that minority language speakers are subject to the pervasive ideology of the dominant language, some speakers who (or whose families) may traditionally have been associated with minority ethnic languages are using language and languages in new ways (Rampton 1995, 1999). While some speakers are either unable to negotiate their identities from inextricably powerless positions, and others in powerful positions have no need to do so, some speakers in modern nation states are using their linguistic skills to negotiate new subject positions (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001; Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). In what Gal (2006: 27) describes as ‘self-conscious, anti-standardizing moves’, such negotiations may include linguistic practices that reframe previous standard varieties, incorporating, inter alia, urban popular cultural forms, minority linguistic forms, hybridities and inventions. Here language practices associated with immigrant groups no longer represent backward-looking traditions but may be linked to global youth culture and urban sophistication.

Languages and language practices are not necessarily equated to national identity (but may be so) and are not necessarily dominated by the standardised variety. Despite powerful ideologies of homogeneity, populations in many countries – especially countries with a history of recent immigration – continue to be heterogeneous in their practices.

Jørgensen (2010) points to the fluidity of late modern society, in which identities are not necessarily imposed from above, but may be negotiable within certain social settings. Jørgensen proposes that language users create, construct and negotiate identities on the basis of a range of resources. To the extent that such resources are part of language, identities are constructed and negotiated in linguistic discourse. Identities are performed, constructed, enacted and produced in communication with others. That is, ‘identities arise in interaction among people’ (ibid.: 4).

As such, identities are to a large extent subject to negotiation. García (2010) refers to the role of language diversity in the negotiation and construction of identity and suggests that language choice involves negotiation in every interaction, as particular linguistic resources may provide or prevent access to powerful social networks. That is, multilingual speakers ‘decide who they
want to be and choose their language practices accordingly’ (ibid.: 524). However, it is important to remember that not all linguistic resources are equally available to all speakers at all times (Creese et al. 2006). Certain subject positions may either be non-negotiable, or only partly negotiable, in particular places and at particular times, as social contexts prevent individuals from accessing resources (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). The relationship between language in use and action and the ascription, performance and negotiation of identities is therefore dynamic and complex.

Researching heteroglossia and identity: an ethnographic approach

What we have argued so far is that when people communicate they position themselves and others in the social world. They do so through the deployment of linguistic (and other semiotic) resources with recognisable associations. Some linguistic resources point to certain types of profession, sets of beliefs or socio-economic categories. However, the relationship between linguistic resources and belonging to social groups is not straightforward or linear. When membership of a group may be (perceived to be) faked and when stylisation, irony, parody, satire, mockery, pastiche and so on are commonplace, it is clear that the ways in which identities are performed linguistically are highly nuanced and may best be understood through detailed and repeated observation. We therefore turn to linguistic ethnography as an approach to the investigation of heteroglossia and identity.

Copland and Creese (2014) point out that linguistic ethnography is equipped to study local and immediate action from the point of view of social actors and to consider how (inter)actions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures (see also Pérez-Milans, this volume). They argue that linguistic ethnography views language as communicative action functioning in social contexts in ongoing routines of people’s daily lives. In doing so, a linguistic ethnographic approach is able to investigate how language resources are deployed and what this can tell us about wider social constraints, structures and ideologies. In linguistic ethnography, researchers analyse linguistic and other semiotic signs (that is, appearance, gesture, gaze, etc.) as social phenomena open to interpretation and translation, but also predicated on convention, presupposition and previous patterns of social use and social action. Because the sign is the basic unit of meaning, linguistic ethnographers are keen to understand how it is interpreted within its social context. Through rich description, the recording of audio and video files, a range of interview techniques and the collection of other textual documents, researchers attempt to understand the relevance of signs in ongoing communicative activity and situated multimodal social action.

Blommaert (2007: 682) argues that ethnography does not attempt to reduce the complexity of social events by focusing a priori on a selected range of relevant features, ‘but it tries to describe and analyse the complexity of social events comprehensively’. It is the comprehensive description and analysis of the complex social world that confronts researchers as a challenge. Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 10) take context as a crucial feature of ethnographic research. They argue that contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. They point out that meaning takes shape within specific places, activities, social relations, interactional histories, text trajectories, institutional regimes and cultural ideologies, produced and construed by people with expectations and repertoires that should be understood ethnographically. Blommaert and Rampton further point out that analysis of meaning should include attention to biography, identifications, stance and nuance as they are signalled in the linguistic and textual fine grain. Blommaert and Rampton propose that it is therefore worth turning to language and
discourse to understand how categories and identities are circulated and reproduced in textual representations and communicative encounters. They argue for a combination of linguistics and ethnography, an extension of ethnography into intricate zones of culture and society that might otherwise be missed. An approach that combines linguistics and ethnography and insists on intense scrutiny of textual and discursive detail discloses the ways in which widely distributed ideologies penetrate the world of talk and text. Blommaert and Rampton argue for an ethnography enriched with highly developed heuristic frameworks and procedures for discovering otherwise under-analysed intricacies in social relations. In doing so they propose an approach based in ‘ethnographic description of the who, what, where, when, how and why of semiotic practice’ (ibid.: 12).

Heller (1984) asked the following key questions, which have been influential in shaping research combining an interest in language and social life and which are helpful for applied linguists doing language and identity studies to keep in mind: ‘What is it about the way we use language that has an impact on social processes? What is it about social processes that influences linguistic ones?’ (ibid.: 54). In later work, Heller (2008: 250) pointed out that:

Ethnographies allow us to get at things we would otherwise never be able to discover. They allow us to see how language practices are connected to the very real conditions of people’s lives, to discover how and why language matters to people in their own terms, and to watch processes unfold over time.

Heller argued that ethnographies allow us to see complexity and connections and to tell a story that illuminates social processes and generates explanations for why people do and think the things they do. Heller (ibid.) proposed the term ‘ethnography of bilingualism’ to describe a research process that accepts that ‘bilingualism’ is a socially and historically produced notion, politically and ideologically embedded and related to identity at global, national and local levels. An ethnography of bilingualism allows the linking of language in everyday life to the trajectories of individuals, the construction of social boundaries and relations of inequality. In more recent work, Heller (2010: 400) further explains that: ‘The challenge is to capture the ways in which things unfold in real time, and the ways in which they sediment into constraints that go far beyond the time and place of specific interactions.’

We take up this challenge, proposing an approach that incorporates ethnography of bilingualism, or we should say an ethnography of heteroglossia, that enables us to interpret the meanings of language in use in terms of social worlds past and present.

Linguistic ethnography’s strength derives from combining different data collection and analytic processes rather than separating them out. It is in combining approaches that robust and nuanced findings emerge. The generation of knowledge from ethnographic data requires not only that different types of evidence (e.g. field note entries, audio recordings of spoken interaction, SMS messages, interview transcripts, etc.) are analysed in relation to their synchronic and diachronic contexts, but also that they are analysed in relation to each other. That is, rather than remaining decontextualised, they should be linked in the analytic process, so that meanings are produced from the interaction of a number of sources and types of evidence. Analysis of ethnographic data also requires a dynamic interaction between the biographical and historical trajectories of the researcher(s) and the material under scrutiny. A key part of the context of ethnographic material is the collection of that material. Gathering evidential stuff changes it. Field notes, audio recordings, photographs, Facebook updates and so on are not unmodified or raw material. Rather, they are products of the interaction between
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the researcher(s) and the phenomena under observation. Furthermore, analysing evidential material changes it. As we annotate, code, summarise, link and expand upon the evidence, we bring to bear our own past, present and future. In so doing, we create meanings from the interface between our own experience (including our reading, thinking, talking and listening) and the behaviour and practice (including the linguistic behaviour and practice) of those who have consented to be observed. This is a process that defines ethnography: becoming sufficiently reflexive to recognise that we are not only part of our evidence, but also agentic meaning-makers in the construction of knowledge.

In order to illustrate these points we will briefly offer an example from our recent research. The example is taken from a research project that observed and analysed multilingual practices in different educational sites in four European countries. The UK case study investigated a Panjabi complementary school that was mainly devoted to the teaching of Panjabi. Complementary schools are community-run, often small-scale organisations staffed by community groups. Angela Creese and researcher Jaspreet Kaur Takhi spent nine months observing and writing field notes in all classes in the school. After five months, one class on each of two sites was identified for closer observation, based on the teachers’ and students’ willingness to participate in the research project. Two students and the teacher and teaching assistant in each class were identified as ‘key participants’ for focused observation. Key participant students, teachers and teaching assistants were issued with digital voice recorders to audio-record themselves during class time. The key participants were also asked to use the digital voice recorders outside the classroom to record their linguistic repertoires at home and in other environments. The researchers interviewed 15 key stakeholders in the schools, including teachers and administrators, children and their parents. In addition, classroom sessions on each of the sites were video-recorded. In each of two focal classrooms the teacher, teaching assistants and two young people were given audio-recording devices for self-recording. Each week the researchers downloaded the recordings from home and classroom recordings. Interviews were conducted after field visits had ended. Teachers, students, teaching assistants, parents and administrators were interviewed. Here we refer to excerpts from a single interaction that was audio-recorded in one of the classrooms in the Panjabi school.

Extract 1 occurs at the beginning of class. In this interaction, a student, Gopinder (female, aged 15), is audible, along with Komal (aged 17) and the teacher, Gurpal (aged 23).

Extract 1

1 Gurpal:   ok what’s a mustachio?
2 Komal:   a moustache
3 Gurpal:   moonsh <moustache>
4 Gopinder:   mooch mooch is a
5 Komal:   oh moonsh <moustache>
6 Gurpal:   [laughs]
7 Komal:   moonsh moustache a mustachio what’s a mustachio?
8 Gurpal:   [to Gopinder:] not a pistachio
9 Gopinder:   I didn’t say mus
10 Gurpal:   mustachio
11 Komal:   mustach
12 Gurpal:   [laughs:] mustachio
13 Gopinder:   what is it?
14 Komal:   what language
The teacher, Gurpal, introduces the lesson with a question that generically fits the context, asking what appears to be a request for the students to define an unfamiliar word: ‘what’s a mustachio?’ The purpose of the class (and school) is for the students to learn Panjabi. It might therefore be assumed that the teacher would request the meaning of a Panjabi word, or the Panjabi translation of an English word. However, instead, he asks a question that has no readily available ‘correct’ answer. ‘Mustachio’ does not appear in the Oxford English Dictionary, although ‘moustachoied’ is listed as deriving from the Spanish mostacho and the Italian mostacchio. ‘Mustachio’ has a number of connotations in contemporary popular culture, including a luxurious handlebar moustache, the name of a nightclub in Birmingham and a character in a best-selling video game (Gurpal often referred to the names of video games). While Gurpal’s question fits the norms of the language teaching class, it is a parody, or perhaps a pastiche, of the genre. Rampton (2006: 235) distinguishes between ‘parody grounded in moral and political criticism of the oppressive distortions of class’ and ‘pastiche, pleasure in the play of voices’. Komal recognises the ‘language teaching’ genre and volunteers an answer (line 2). Consistent with the structural norm of Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF), in line 3, Gurpal offers what appears to be an answer to his question: ‘moonsh’. However, this linguistic feature is straightforwardly associated with neither English nor Panjabi (the norms for this classroom), but Hindi. Gurpal adds to the already heterogeneous nature of the interaction by introducing this word. Gopinder volunteers an answer, ‘mooch’ (line 4), an Anglicised version of the Panjabi word moochaa (moustache). ‘Mustachio’ has a number of connotations in contemporary popular culture, including a luxurious handlebar moustache, the name of a nightclub in Birmingham and a character in a best-selling video game (Gurpal often referred to the names of video games). While Gurpal’s question fits the norms of the language teaching class, it is a parody, or perhaps a pastiche, of the genre. Rampton (2006: 235) distinguishes between ‘parody grounded in moral and political criticism of the oppressive distortions of class’ and ‘pastiche, pleasure in the play of voices’. Komal recognises the ‘language teaching’ genre and volunteers an answer (line 2). Consistent with the structural norm of Initiation–Response–Feedback (IRF), in line 3, Gurpal offers what appears to be an answer to his question: ‘moonsh’. However, this linguistic feature is straightforwardly associated with neither English nor Panjabi (the norms for this classroom), but Hindi. Gurpal adds to the already heterogeneous nature of the interaction by introducing this word. Gopinder volunteers an answer, ‘mooch’ (line 4), an Anglicised version of the Panjabi word moochaa (moustache). Komal meanwhile, recognising the familiar IRF structure, dutifully accepts her teacher’s offer.

In Bakhtin’s terms, while the departure from the expected linguistic norms pulls centrifugally, the adherence to structural norms pulls centripetally. The teacher’s laughter indicates his amusement at the game, which is neither random nor chaotic, but relies on all participants’ shared knowledge of the genre. Komal tries out three of the versions of the word currently in play (line 7) and repeats Gurpal’s initial question. However, she does more than merely repeat the question as, in recontextualising it, she portrays and evaluates it. Gurpal keeps up the game, saying to Gopinder ‘not a pistachio’ (line 8). Gopinder, however, defends herself, again responding within the expected norms. Her refusal to have the ‘incorrect’ term ascribed to her (‘I didn’t say’ in line 9) indexes her attitude to correctness and academic success, which we saw on many occasions in this class. Gurpal repeats the original term on several occasions (e.g. lines 12, 16, 18), correcting Gopinder’s (non-existent) error; again his laughter reveals his amusement. With some exasperation now, Gopinder demands the correct answer – ‘what is it?’ (line 13) and ‘can you explain in English?’ (line 15) – while Komal asks ‘what language?’ (line 14). Gopinder corrects Gurpal, offering the normative Panjabi term ‘moochaa’ (line 15). These interjections index...
the students’ orientation to correctness and academic achievement, as they attempt to pull the interaction round to the ‘right answer’. The teacher’s response is again to merely repeat the original word, prompting Gopinder to ask ‘is that what Indian people say?’ (line 17). In doing so, she distances herself from ‘Indian people’, as if they may be so foreign that they use this alien word. Komal, however, seems to tumble the trick, her laughter and intonation in saying ‘right’ (line 19) expressing both shared amusement and scepticism. Gurpal continues, extending the parody or pastiche of the normative, generic discourse: ‘you’ve learnt a new word, we’ll start using mustachio from now on’ (line 20) and ‘homework, where’s your mustachio man’ (line 24). Here the informal ‘man’ provides a signal that the homework task is not serious, but is part of the pastiche. Komal ultimately suggests, in an aside apparently to herself, ‘maybe he just can’t read’ (line 26). This apparent (but not serious) explanation of her teacher’s behaviour positions him as the very antithesis of her orientation to academic success.

In Extract 2 Gurpal has turned the focus of the lesson to include discussion of kinship terms, one of the core elements of the curriculum in this school.

**Extract 2**

1. Sandip: a brother’s wife a brother’s wife would call the sister-in-law a nanaan
2. < husband’s sister > wouldn’t they?
3. Gurpal: [to Simran:] he would call you bhabbi < brother’s wife > because he’s younger than you
4. Simran: he wouldn’t call me bhabbi < brother’s wife >
5. Gurpal: no I mean your, no you, his wife would call you bhabbi < brother’s wife > yeah
6. Komal: yeah yeah because my mum calls my chachi ji < father’s brother’s wife > nanaan < husband’s younger brother’s wife > what’s dehraani?
7. < husband’s younger brother’s wife >
8. 11 Sandip: I think it’s the same thing isn’t it?
9. 12 Komal: is it?
10. Gurpal: because he’s younger than you; if he’s older than you then he wouldn’t, then she wouldn’t call you bhabhi < older brother’s wife >
11. Sandip: why do they make everything so complicated?
12. Komal: isn’t it the oldest wife is bhabhi ji < older brother’s wife >
13. Shaan: I am just going to call them by their names
14. Gurpal: like the oldest one
15. Sandip: err no, because my chachi < father’s younger brother’s wife >
16. Gurpal: because when you go to India that’s, these are the words that they use in India, they wouldn’t say to you tere phraa di boti kiddha < how is your brother’s wife > they will say you know teri bhabbi < older brother’s wife > you know they call her bhabbi < older brother’s wife >

Agha (2007: 342) proposed that analysis of how kinship behaviours are performed and construed in context reveals that much of the complexity of kinship relations derives not from disembodied ideas in the head, ‘but from models of social relationship inferable from text-in-context relations among perceivable signs’. Across data sets in this study (field notes, interviews, transcripts of audio-recordings) kinship terms were represented in Panjabi, and were not translated into English. Translation into English appeared to deplete the richness of familial relations available to the speakers. The students and teacher do not appear to have language boundaries in mind as they discuss kinship.
terms in their families. They have a bank of linguistic resources that they draw on together, sharing a common knowledge (if partial knowledge) of family relations. In Extract 2 Simran contests the teacher’s answer (‘he wouldn’t call me bhabhi’, line 5), while Sandip (‘why do they make everything so complicated?’, line 15) and Shaan (‘I am just going to call them by their names’, line 17) take a stand against the necessity to become familiar with the complex system of kinship terms. Both of these positions appear to be acceptable in the inclusive ecology of this classroom.

Furthermore, in the terms of García and Li Wei (2014), this section of discourse is likely to strengthen the students’ metalinguistic awareness and cross-linguistic flexibility. In addition to quick-fire metasemantic negotiations about the labelling of particular kinship terms, language comments on itself metapragmatically (Silverstein 1993) and meaning is made visible through metacommentary – i.e. through comment about language (Rymes 2014: 314) (e.g. ‘nobody uses these words, but they’re good to know’, line 19). Gurpal aligns himself as a member of the same group as the students: somebody with a knowledge of, and proficiency in, kinship terms that might index a greater investment in ‘Indianness’, or ‘Panjabiness’.

Now the lesson turns to the not uncommon task of students composing sentences in the target language (Panjabi) on the theme of ‘what I did on my holidays’. Ten-year-old Himmat is the first to present his sentences to the class. Pavan, the 19-year-old teaching assistant, is shocked that Himmat claims to have gone to the cinema to watch a horror film.

**Extract 3**

1 Himmat: mair cinema gaya si mair dukaan gaya si <I went to the cinema, I went to the shop>
2 Pavan: what did you watch in the cinema?
3 Himmat: Little Red Riding Hood
4 Komal: [laughs]
5 Pavan: isn’t that a horror film? [laughter] why did you watch it? why do your parents let you watch it?
6 Himmat: Little Red Riding Hood your mum would not let you see that, and
7 Pavan: neither would your dad
8 Komal: you didn’t go, your parents, no, no dude
9 Pavan: Himmy Himmy Himmy your mum would not let you see that, and
10 Himmat: no I got it on piracy copy
11 Komal: so you didn’t go to the cinema?
12 Pavan: your sentences were good but you watch illegal DVDs [class laughs]
13 Himmat: ok guys listen, I think we are missing the point here, it’s sentence structure that we are looking at
14 Komal: [ironically]: yeah, but illegal, you know, illegal activities
15 Pavan: your sentences were good but you watch illegal DVDs [class laughs]
16 Himmat: that’s not good
17 Komal: after you’ve finished mair vi dekhlaunga <I will see it too> [class
18 Sandip: I bet it was Chinese man
19 Gurpal: laughs]

Amid some scepticism about Himmat’s story from Pavan and the other students, Gurpal points out that this is an academic exercise about practising sentence structure (‘I think we are missing the point here’, line 13). Komal in particular is willing to gently tease the young student (e.g. line 15), while Pavan is able to simultaneously praise him and tease him (‘your sentences were good but you watch illegal DVDs’, line 16). Gurpal’s second intervention serves to position himself as a member of the youth group interested in the pirated DVD (line 19), while at the same time modelling heteroglossic discourse that calls for comprehension of the
mixed code in order to understand his joke (‘after you’ve finished mair vi dekhluṅga’). Gurpal flattens the distinction between teacher and students, translanguaging for identity investment and cultural engagement.

The prescribed classroom activity prompts a discussion of what Sandip (male, 17 years of age) did during the school holidays. The gurdwara is the local place of worship for members of the Sikh religion:

**Extract 4**

1 Sandip: [shouts:] I went to the gurdwara three days in a row
2 Komal: did you have an akhand path? <72 hours of continuous prayer>
3 Sandip: and then I got constipation. My days
5 Komal: dude, dude
6 Sandip: [laughs]
7 Komal: I don’t want to know about this
8 Sandip: the rotiyaan <chapattis> are hard as rock I’m not even joking
9 Komal: did you not make them?
10 Gurpal: listen
11 Sandip: no, at the gurdwara
12 Gurpal: don’t bad mouth the roti in the gurdwara, those rotiyaan are for people
13 who don’t get roti
14 Simran: yeah, seva <selfless service>
15 Sandip: no, cos they’re usually, they’re usually dank, they’re usually dank,
16 Komal: dude, dude
17 Sandip: [laughs]
18 Komal: I love the gurdwara food to be fair
19 Gurpal: there you go
20 Sandip: no, I do like it, it was just that weekend I think it was cos my thyee
21 Komal: [laughter] don’t diss your thyee <father’s older brother’s wife>

In Extract 4, the discussion moves forward confidently, retaining Panjabi for terms associated with Sikhism and kinship. Sandip describes his commitment to the religious practice of undertaking 72 hours of continuous prayer. However, he does so through a mini-narrative that partly usurps this serious cultural-religious practice (‘I got constipation’, line 4). Gurpal acts as a moderator of cultural values here, intervening in the discussion to insist that there should be no criticism of the emblematic ‘roti’, bread served at the gurdwara to any poor person who may come looking for a meal (line 12). He finds support from Simran (‘yeah, seva’, line 14) and Komal (‘I love the gurdwara food to be fair’, line 17), and Sandip concedes with a more emollient ‘no, I do like it’ (line 19), although in doing so he runs up against Komal’s family values (line 21). The exchange provides examples of young people being light-hearted but also serious about their cultural heritages.

However, this is not an example of heteroglossia that merely moves between ‘English’ and ‘Panjabi’. A more nuanced analysis reveals that the young people adopt a discourse that is sharply aware of terms emblematic of certain cultural values and traditions (e.g. ‘seva’, ‘akhand path’, ‘roti’) and kinship (‘thyee’). Furthermore, this is not a binary discourse. A more helpful lens than language(s) here is that of register, as the young people adopt a discourse that positions them as urban, sophisticated speakers of a repertoire which includes non-standard terms commonly understood (by them at least) to index a youthful, ‘cool’ positionality: ‘my days’, ‘dude’, ‘I’m not even joking’, ‘bad mouth’, ‘dank’, ‘to be fair’, ‘diss’. Such discourse is rapidly mobile, and
at the time of writing, a year or two after the interaction itself, these same terms are no doubt as uncool as can be. At the time, however, they served as part of a repertoire that indexed a common identity position for this group of young people.

So how does an analysis based on Bakhtin’s notion of ‘heteroglossia’ illuminate our understanding of the ‘identities’ of these young people and their families? Certainly we are not able to make arguments based on the very small fragments of material presented in this chapter. However, when we view them alongside similar material gathered ethnographically, that is, repeatedly and in detail, over the course of a year, and, crucially, when we analyse them in relation to each other, Bakhtin’s thinking offers valuable insights into the complexity of communication and identity in the contemporary world. In this classroom different ideological points of view coexist and compete in the discourse of the young people.

**Facing challenges**

What are the challenges for applied linguists of adopting and adapting Bakhtin’s analysis of heteroglossic language to ethnographic research in contemporary conditions? While Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia offers a valuable and elegant tool to understand the dynamic nature of the construction of linguistic identities, Lähteenmäki (2010) suggests that its explanatory potential may nonetheless be limited. In his enthusiasm to describe linguistic diversity as the normal state of a language, Bakhtin tends to ‘ignore the fact that within heteroglossia linguistic resources are not equally distributed between individuals and different social groups’ (Lähteenmäki 2010: 30). Celebrating diversity does not account for the ways in which linguistic difference often constitutes social inequality. Bakhtin’s theoretical apparatus, developed in the context of analysis of Dostoevsky’s novels, has the capacity to move us from identification of different languages to an analysis of the coexistence of competing ideological points of view. However, such an apparatus, subject to the contingencies of the time and space of its own production, cannot be imported wholesale as a means to interpret linguistic and social phenomena in the twenty-first century. Instead we take heteroglossia as a point of departure, a powerful lens with which to bring into focus the complexity and mobility of superdiverse societies.

A second challenge for language and identity research in applied linguistics relates to Blommaert’s (2007: 682) imperative that social research should ‘describe and analyse the complexity of social events comprehensively’. If we are interested in social and ideological differentiation in society and the ways in which linguistic forms index various aspects of individuals’ and communities’ ‘social histories, circumstances, and identities’ (Bailey 2012: 506), an analysis of heteroglossia is well suited to our aims. However, the practical considerations present a challenge. Comprehensive observation of people communicating in their everyday lives requires considerable investment of time. Whether in institutional or private/semi-private settings, it requires repeated and long-term observation and detailed attention to participants’ sensitivities. At a time when other pressures determine that time available for fieldwork is limited, compromises are almost unavoidable.

A third challenge for applied linguists’ scholars is perhaps the most significant. It is the challenge to ensure that we do not move to a position in which heteroglossia and ethnography become detached and separate from each other, with Bakhtin’s theoretical ideas providing the analysis, while ethnography gets its hands dirty with the everyday stuff of description. What we propose is perhaps the opposite of this – an ‘ethnography of heteroglossia’, in which ethnography provides a perspective on language and identity, while heteroglossia is defined as and by sets of practices. The challenge is to develop a programme of research, an ethnography of
A linguistic ethnography of identity

heteroglossia, which is a theory of practice which is situated in practice. When we do so we may make visible the ways in which linguistic diversity indexes and brings into being social diversity.

Summary

In this chapter we have reviewed recent research, which has argued that Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia has considerable potential as a lens through which to view and better understand the diversity of linguistic practice in late modern societies. Pursuant to scholarship that has demonstrated that language and other semiotic resources are not articulated separately, but are deployed in changing communicative repertoires through which people make meaning, heteroglossia does not focus on which language is in use in a particular interaction, but starts from an understanding of voice. We further argued that a heteroglossic analysis enables us to gain purchase on specific positionings in the social world; that such an analysis engages with social tensions and conflicts; and that discourse is frequently filled with the voices and perspectives of others. We proposed an analytic perspective that takes linguistic diversity to be constitutive of, and constituted by, social diversity.

We further argued that a heteroglossic analysis is equipped to investigate and understand the construction, ascription, performance and negotiation of identities in discourse. We proposed that language users create, construct and negotiate identities on the basis of a range of resources and that identities are constructed and negotiated in linguistic discourse. Identities are performed, constructed, enacted and produced in communication with others. While the deployment in a particular context of certain resources traditionally associated with a language constitutes identity work, a heteroglossic analysis does not end there. Discourse points to social position and enacts social tensions and conflicts, wherever certain signs point to certain (economic, or symbolic) resources, or where particular voices coexist within an utterance. These phenomena are invariably identifiable, whether a single language is in use, or several languages are deployed simultaneously. In these respects a heteroglossic analysis, on which language and identity studies in applied linguistics could draw, illuminates claims and contestations related to identities.

Related topics

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and identity in linguistic ethnography; Language and ethnic identity; Linguistic practices and transnational identities; The politics of researcher identities: opportunities and challenges in identities research; Styling and identity in a second language; Language and identity research in online environments: a multimodal ethnographic perspective; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics; Identity in language learning and teaching: research agendas for the future.

Further reading


Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese


**Note**


**References**


Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese


