

# Sociolinguistic scales

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## *Abstract*

*This paper introduces the notion of “scale” as a theoretical sociolinguistic concept. Scale is a key notion in social theory, notably in social geography and World Systems Analysis. Whereas the traditional sociolinguistic register is dominated by horizontal spatial metaphors of distribution, spread, flow and trajectory, scale is a vertical metaphor. It suggests that processes of distribution and flow are accompanied by processes of hierarchical ordering, in which different phenomena are not juxtaposed, but layered and distinguished as to the scale on which they operate and have value and validity. Such scale shifts, triggering shifts in value and validity, are first theoretically discussed, then illustrated in a number of analytical vignettes that demonstrate the reformulating effect of the use of scale as an analytic concept. The paper fits in a wider program of developing a model of sociolinguistics that is theoretically adequate for addressing phenomena of globalization.*

## **1. Introduction**

Theorizing involves the exploration of new images and metaphors, capable of helping us to imagine objects differently, to see them *as* different objects calling for different analytic approaches.<sup>1</sup> One of the metaphors often used in globalization studies, handed down from fields such as history and social geography, is that of scales (Swyngedouw 1996; Uitermark 2002). Scales and scaling processes are an important part of the theoretical toolkit of World Systems Analysis (Wallerstein 1983, 2000). In their most elementary form these notions point to the fact that social events and processes move and develop on a continuum of layered scales, with the strictly local (micro) and the global (macro) as extremes, and with several intermediary scales (e.g., the level of the State) in between (Lefebvre 2000; also Geertz 2004). Events and processes in globalization occur at different scale-levels, and we see interactions between the different

scales as a core feature of understanding such events and processes. Appadurai's (1996) notion of "vernacular globalization" is a case in point: forms of globalization that contribute to new forms of locality. This locality, however, is destabilized—the immigrant neighborhood no longer looks like the "traditional" neighborhood—because of influences from higher-level scales: migration and diaspora, neighborhood multilingualism, and the presence of the homeland in economies of consumption and in public identity display (Mankekar 2002).

Sociolinguistics has started to address globalization as an issue over the last couple of years, and some remarkable results have already been achieved (e.g., Coupland 2003; Collins & Slembrouck 2005). Rampton's work (2005, 2006) addresses the complex and polymorphous discourse practices of globalized ("Late Modern") school children in Britain, and concludes that schools have become subject to what Appadurai would call vernacular globalization (see also Heller 1999; Block 2005). Similarly, Jacquemet (2005) addresses the phenomenon of "transidiomatic practices" as one instance of sociolinguistic effects of globalization processes: language practices detaching language resources from their "original" community and space of use, to be deployed (often in a mediated form) elsewhere. Globalization is also an undercurrent in work that addresses issues of linguistic minorities and the dominance of "international languages" such as English (Phillipson 1992; Freeland & Patrick 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Based on urban neighborhood ethnography, Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck (2005a, 2005b) embarked on a theoretical exercise aimed at creating a more profiled place for socio-spatial features in sociolinguistic analysis. We argued that space is not a passive background but an *agentive* force in sociolinguistic processes, notably in the assessment of competences. Articulate, multilingual individuals could become inarticulate and "language-less" by moving from a space in which their linguistic resources were valued and recognized into one in which they didn't count as valuable and understandable. Thus, migrant children who possess complex and developed language and literacy skills could be declared illiterate in Belgian immersion classes, where Dutch language and literacy was the only recognized linguistic capital (see also Blommaert, Creve & Willaert 2006). This phenomenon—gaining or losing "competence" by moves in space—is part of the experience of migration and diaspora, and it could be a key to understanding sociolinguistic processes in globalization.

We also argued that human social environments needed to be seen as polycentric and stratified, where people continuously need to observe "norms"—*orders of indexicality*—that are attached to a multitude of centers of authority, local as well as translocal, momentary as well as lasting: the family, the peer group and the immediate neighborhood

networks; religion, the media, transnational networks, the State (both home and host), the labor market, and abstract ideals and role models (e.g., gender and social status roles). Such orders of indexicality were stratified complexes in which distinctions exist between “better” and “worse” forms of communication, and in diasporic neighborhoods, such orders of indexicality combine and compete: one can be a “good” user of language in the neighborhood network, but a “bad” one in the labor market or in the host State’s school system. The result of these theoretical exercises was a conception of sociolinguistic and discursive phenomena as essentially *layered*, even if they appear to be one-time, purely synchronic and unique events (Blommaert 2005a). These elements will be carried along in the reflections that follow. I will submit that the layered and polycentric nature of sociolinguistic phenomena should be seen as tied to differences between “scales,” and that introducing this notion of scales strengthens the social-theoretical foundations of sociolinguistic analysis.

In that sense, this effort fits a broader attempt to construct a sociolinguistics that does not yield absurd models of society—as it unfortunately often does now. If we look at society through the lens of studies of language in society, too often what we see is a dramatically distorted, simplified and twisted image. Sociolinguistics should be the study of language in order to gain an understanding of society, not a reduction of society to linguistic structure.

## **2. The point of departure: horizontal and vertical metaphors**

As said above, the point of departure for what follows is the non-unified nature of sociolinguistic phenomena. The point has often been noted: acts of communication are all uniquely contextualized, one-time phenomena; yet we understand them because of their manifest lack of autonomy: their coherence with previous traditions of making sense, their connection to shared, enduring patterns of understanding such as frames. This duality, in which language occurs both as an individual, one-time and unique phenomenon and simultaneously as a collective and relatively stable phenomenon, has often been captured under labels such as “micro” and “macro.” The connection between such levels has often been described as complex, difficult, unfathomable. Yet, several very useful theoretical tools have been developed, explicitly identifying the instantaneous transition from one level to another in communication: Gumperz’ (1982) notion of contextualization, Goffman’s (1974) frames, Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) concept of intertextuality and chronotope (as further developed, e.g., by Silverstein 2005; also Fairclough 1992) and Bourdieu’s (1990) habitus.

In all cases, these concepts identify *the jump from one scale to another*: from the individual to the collective, the temporally situated to the trans-temporal, the unique to the common, the token to the type, the specific to the general. And *the connection between such scales is indexical*: it resides in the ways in which unique instances of communication can be captured (indexically) as “framed” understandable communication, pointing towards social and cultural norms, genres, traditions, expectations—phenomena of a higher scale-level. The capacity to achieve understanding in communication is the capacity to lift momentary instances of interaction to the level of common meanings, and the two directions of indexicality (presupposing the retrieval of available meanings, and entailing the production of new meanings; Silverstein 2006a: 14) are at the heart of such processes.<sup>3</sup>

Reviewing current theorizing about such scalar phenomena, we see that a lot of thinking has gone into the connections and movements—sophisticated concepts such as “intertextuality” and “entextualization” are results of that. What exactly it is that is connected and moved between, however, has largely been neglected as an area of theorizing. One effect has been that notions of “contextualization” (the process of conversion) have been better developed than notions of “context” (the spaces in and between which contextualization happens) (see Hanks 2006 for a recent survey). I have been using the term “scale” as an attempt to provide a metaphor that suggests that we have to imagine things that are of *a different order*, that are hierarchically ranked, stratified. The metaphor suggests spatial images; these images, however, are *vertical metaphors of space* rather than *horizontal* ones (implicit in terms such as “distribution” and “spread,” but also “community,” “culture,” and so on). Scales offer us a vertical image of spaces, of *space as stratified* and therefore power-invested; but they also suggest deep connections between spatial and temporal features. In that sense, scale may be a concept that allows us to see sociolinguistic phenomena as non-unified *in relation to a stratified, non-unified image of social structure*. Note that the introduction of “scale” does not reject horizontal images of space; it complements them with a vertical dimension of hierarchical ordering and power differentiation. Let us look at these aspects of scales in some detail.

### 3. Scales as semiotized space and time

A notion such as “scale,” to be sure, is the imagining of an image—something of which Wallerstein warns us that it is an invention of

social-scientific, traditional thought (Wallerstein 1997: chapter 10, 2001). In particular, our current attempt at “spatializing” sociolinguistic theory risks being flawed by that institutional problem inscribed in the division of labor between the social sciences: the separation of time and space as different aspects of social life and social phenomena. Against this separation, Wallerstein pits the notion of TimeSpace—a “single dimension” which locks together time and space (Wallerstein 1997: 1; also Fals Borda 2000). Every social event develops simultaneously in space and in time, often in multiply imagined spaces and time frames. So here is one critical qualification: a notion such as scale refers to phenomena that develop in TimeSpace. Scale is not only a spatial metaphor.

Talk about “time” and “space,” however, is slippery, and we must add a second necessary qualification. The phenomena that develop in TimeSpace are *social* phenomena, and the TimeSpace in which they develop is consequently an “objective” (physical) context *made social*. It is an often repeated assertion: people make physical space and time into controlled, regimented objects and instruments, and they do so through semiotic practices; semiotized TimeSpace is social, cultural, political, ideological, in short: *historical* TimeSpace (Lefebvre 2000; also Haviland 2003; Goodwin 2002). A third necessary qualification to be added follows from the previous one. The semiotization of TimeSpace as social contexts always involves more than just images of space and time. As we shall see, a move from one scale-level to another invokes or indexes *images of society*, through socially and culturally constructed (semiotized) metaphors and images of time and space. The general direction of such moves can be formulated as follows:

Table 1.

	Lower scale	Higher scale
Time	Momentary	Timeless
Space	Local, situated	Translocal, widespread

In social interaction, such TimeSpace moves—“scale-jumping” as they are called by Uitermark (2002: 750)—are converted into interactional patterns that index norms, expectations, and degrees of generalness of positions. They are converted, in other words, into *statements that index social order*, and the TimeSpace imagery provides rich indexicals (sometimes iconically) for aspects of a real or imagined social order. Imagine, by way of illustration, the following bit of interaction between a tutor (T) and a PhD student (S):

- S: I'll start my dissertation with a chapter reporting on my fieldwork  
 T: We start our dissertations with a literature review chapter here.

The tutor performs a scale-jump here, in which s/he moves from the local and situated to the translocal and general, invoking practices that have validity beyond the here-and-now—*normative validity*. This “upscaling” is articulated through a change from personal to impersonal—compare S’s use of “I” and “my” with T’s “we” and “our,” and T’s invocation of “here”: a community larger than just the student and the tutor.<sup>4</sup> The student’s utterance was centered on his/her own work and plans; the tutor’s response recenters it on a higher scale-level: that of the larger academic community and institutional environment of which both are part. The individual plan of the student is countered by an invocation of general rules and norms, valid “here” (i.e., valid for the particular student as well). The tutor’s move is a vertical move performed in a stratified, hierarchically layered system, in which higher scale-levels (institutional and community norms and rules) prevail over lower scale-levels (the individual concerns of the student). It is, of course, a power move in which a higher level of relevance, truth, validity or value is called in to cancel the suggestion made by the student, in which individuals have been replaced by institutionally circumscribed roles, and in which the *specific* case is measured against *categories* of cases: from token to type, from contextualized to decontextualized. The scale-jump thus made is a complex one, in which various kinds of semiotic transformations occur:

Table 2.

Lower scale	Higher scale
Momentary	Timeless
Local, situated	Translocal, widespread
Personal, individual	Impersonal, collective
Contextualized	Decontextualized
Subjective	Objective
Specific	General, categorial
Token	Type
Individual	Role, stereotype
Diversity, variation	Uniformity, homogeneity

All of this is produced through simple grammatical, stylistic, and generic operations in the utterance. The fact that these operations are performed by the tutor and not by the student is, of course, not accidental. As Uitermark (2002) notes, some people or groups can jump scales while others cannot, and “outscaling” is a frequent power tactic: lifting a particular

issue to a scale-level that is inaccessible to the other. This happens, e.g., when a lawyer shifts into legalese or a doctor into medical jargon: the capacity to produce a certain register affords particular power-and-identity tactics of exclusion and hierarchical ranking, and register is a powerful scale-jumping instrument (cf., Silverstein 2006b). Jumping scales depends on access to discursive resources that index and iconicize particular scale-levels, and such access is an object of inequality. As Conley & O'Barr's (1990) work on small claims courts demonstrated some time ago, discursive resources that are empowering at one scale-level (e.g., issue centered emotive discourses) can be disempowering at higher scale levels (where a law centered rational discourse dominates). Power and inequality are, among other things, effects of scaling, of the asymmetrical capacity to invoke particular scale-levels in the interpretation of an act. Scales provide contexts with possible regulations of access.

The apparently simple lexical and grammatical operations performed by the tutor thus trigger a whole range of indexical shifts, redefining the situation, the participants, the topic, the scope of acceptable statements on the topic, and so forth; they also firmly set the event in a normative, general norm-oriented frame. This complex indexical shift can now be described not as a series of individual operations, but as one vertical move within a stratified social meaning system, enabling and mobilizing the various forms of indexical re-ordering of the statement: it introduces a new "indexical order" (Silverstein 2003). Introducing a notion such as scales for describing current phenomena in communicative action has the advantage that it introduces a layered, stratified model of society as a frame for the interpretation of such phenomena. Power and inequality thus become incorporated into our ways of imagining such phenomena, and rather than seeing them as exceptional aberrations in social life (as in many analyses focused on power), they can be seen as integral features of every social event. The new image of society introduced by the tutor's statement organizes the new indexical order: he introduces a rigid, norm-oriented, trans-personal social space—a different power regime for the interaction, which reorganizes the footing on which the participants can interact with one another.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. The social semiotics of scale**

What follows is a series of small vignettes, intended to show the reformulating effect of scale on a range of issues in the study of language in society. The examples are not necessarily compellingly coherent; they are not there to build a case but merely to make a point.<sup>6</sup>

4.1. *Loaded words, intertextual asymmetries*

Let us first have a look at a well-known phenomenon in political discourse: the fact that particular words have different meanings and effects, depending on who uses them and to whom they are used. Intertextuality (or “interdiscursivity” in Fairclough’s 1992 terms; also Silverstein 2005) will be an important concept here. Intertextuality, in its classic interpretations, stands for the fact that words carry with them histories of use and abuse. As Bakhtin (1986) noted, they also carry histories of *evaluation*, of value-attributions providing positive, negative and relative value to terms and statements. Intertextuality is what makes particular terms sensitive.

It is useful to note, however, that terms are never sensitive to everyone, everywhere and all of the time: they are often sensitive to particular groups and not to others, and the values of such words are thus often emblematic of particular social positions. We call the phenomenon in which some groups have access to particular forms of intertextuality and others don’t “intertextual asymmetry.” A term such as “slavery,” when uttered in a classroom where children of Afro-Caribbean backgrounds sit together with Anglo-Saxon British children is likely to trigger different reactions from both: slavery has a different position in the collective and individual imagined histories of the children. Where a neutral and detached, fact-like discourse might be “normal” for the Anglo-Saxon Britons, biographical and self-descriptive discourses can be expected for the Afro-Caribbean children. The fact is that “slavery” fits into, and triggers, very different intertextual worlds for both groups. For the Afro-Caribbean children, it opens long histories of humiliation and repeated displacement, captured in an extensive iconography and infrastructure of cultural remembering—books, films, museums, monuments, and stories. It is, in other words, not a term that can remain locked into the momentary space of classroom discourses on a history topic and on which similar discourses are possible as on, say, the battle of Waterloo or the opening of the Suez Canal. Whereas discourses on the battle of Waterloo can be seen as a momentary *pointillage*—an articulation in situated TimeSpace—discourses on slavery lift the events from the scale of momentary description to the scale of involved history, from token to type, from individual to collective, from person to race, and so on.

Similar intertextual asymmetries are not hard to find.<sup>7</sup> A term such as “holocaust” will have different meaning for Jews than for other people, different meanings for Israelis than for Palestinians, for instance; a term such as “race” has a different ring for an African immigrant than for a white Belgian; a term such as “bitch” has a different ring for men than for women. In each of these instances, we see a shift from momentary



and situated discursive positions towards categorical, collective, and trans-contextual positions. The terms operate, in other words, at different scale-levels for the different groups, and at such levels the ideological load of these words changes from innocent and factual-descriptive to loaded and politically emblematic. The loaded use of such terms, then, defines someone's (categorical) political position; as a racist, a sexist, an anti-Semite, and rather than about concrete and individual instances, discussions rapidly turn into general categorial arguments. Intertextually asymmetrical terms are typical scale-jumping triggers.

The important point to be remembered here is that terms trigger specific forms of intertextuality, and that not every intertext has the same scope, range or weight (cf., Silverstein 2005). Consequently, there are terms whose intertextualities include very distant ones, far removed from the ones that prevailed in the context-of-production. Politically charged terms—terms that index political positions such as anti-Semitism, racism, sexism and so on—often have that potential to be made intertextual with “big” issues and problems. These terms have a high degree of “exportability” across contextualizing spaces and frames, and we will return to the issue of exportability below.

#### 4.2. *Scale and institutional habitus*

Bourdieu's concept of “habitus” refers to the way in which histories become part of people's behavioral predispositions. “Normal” behavior is behavior in which such historical schemes are being inscribed and re-articulated, or in more sophisticated terms:

The structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce the structures of the *habitus*, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences. The *habitus*, product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history.” (Bourdieu 1990: 54)

The intertextual asymmetries discussed above, therefore, can be seen as “habitus” effects: the historical schemes are different for the different groups, and terms thus become inserted in higher-level historical schemes for some than for others.

Similar phenomena operate in a multitude of circumstances in everyday life; bureaucracy provides a rich and fertile breeding ground for them (Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996). In bureaucratic encounters, situated individual events are lifted instantaneously from their unique context to the level of “cases” governed by rules and regulations. This capacity to entextualize unique events as type- and category-governed “cases” is at

the heart of bureaucratic practices, and interestingly, such conversions in which meanings are propelled onto higher scale-levels happen instantaneously in interactional engagement (Blommaert 2005b).

They happen through a variety of discursive instruments, one of which is synoptic reformulations in which the terms used by the client are converted into institutionally sanctioned (i.e., type- and category-oriented, register) terms. This micro-genre is a conversational move in which a statement is summarized and reworded in view of the dominant discursive register of the next step in the procedure. The following example illustrates such synoptic reformulating statements in the context of interviews in the Belgian asylum application procedure (Maryns 2004: 219). The interview was recorded in late 2002 in the interview rooms of the Immigration Office (Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken) in Brussels, and it involves a Flemish-Belgian official interviewer (I) and a male asylum applicant from Cameroon (AS). The interview was conducted in English, and it may be useful to point out that neither of the interactants was a native speaker of that language. The applicant argues that during an incident with law enforcers, both his and his family's identity documents were taken away. However, he fails to identify what particular documents he is talking about, and the interviewer provides a helpful gloss. This is a small negotiation—or conflict—over terminological appropriateness, and I will mark the relevant terms in this exchange in bold:

AS: . . . that my **documents** and inside the file that is so because my head was down but my eye . . .

I notify my (inaudible) and my different different **document** my-my-my **certificate** of my children . . .

I: **Identity documents** and (inaudible)

AS: yeah, yeah, yeah, my-my **identity documents**

The interviewer, thus, provides a helpful gloss, ending the applicant's struggle to find the right term: a cooperative conversational move. Simultaneously, he provides a *summary* and a *register-specific gloss* for the applicant's words ("identity documents"), a regimented term—a term belonging to a particular discursive regime—that can and will be inserted in the official report of this interview. The interviewer simultaneously accomplishes effects at several levels: in the interactional here-and-now, his intervention represents a cooperative move that sustains the flow of the conversation and co-constructs the narrative of the applicant. At the same time, the interviewer satisfies discursive requirements that operate at the next level of the procedure: the level where the dossier is studied by middle-management operatives who measure its plausibility against the types and categories procedurally defined and circumscribed. The

discursive move is, in other words, procedurally proleptic; it propels the situated utterance of the applicant away from the actual context-of-production and converts it (in a case of upscaling) into a piece of bureaucratic, procedurally shaped discourse. The interviewer as a rule is the only one who has access to this scale-level; the upscaling is consequently an act that can only be performed from a particular position of power. The capacity to jump scales has a silencing effect on the other, who is outscaled.

What we should remember here is that habitus-phenomena can be imagined as occurring at different scale-levels, where specific forms of habitus—e.g. institutional habitus—seem to draw on higher-scale histories than others. In a stratified society, habitus is a stratified complex as well, and some forms of habitus will predictably prevail over others because they connect to higher and more powerful scale-levels than others. The capacity to shift in and out of such scaled habituses is a form of identity work that articulates the fine distinctions (in Bourdieu's sense) of social structure.

#### 4.3. *Language and the State*

Whereas the first two vignettes had to do with discourse in practice, the next two vignettes will address issues that have to do with the study of contemporary multilingualism. Let us first consider language policy, and more specifically the way in which the State operates as a particular, very powerful scale-level. Language policies typically emerge from the State or its dependent authorities, and what language policies do is to define and delineate the sociolinguistic landscape of a particular area (the country, region, province, etc.). Interestingly, language policies are very often very bad empirical indicators of the sociolinguistic landscape, as there are usually far more languages spoken in the territory than the ones specified in language policies. Thus, *Ethnologue* lists over 30 languages spoken in South Africa, while the South African constitution defines the country as having 11 official languages (with Sign Language as a quasi-official 12<sup>th</sup>). The 11 official languages are the object of linguistic-institutional elaboration and enjoy rights: the right to be used in public, in education, in the legal system, etc. The others do not figure in the self-presentation of the State, even though they are what the country is sociolinguistically made up of.

The horizontal distribution of languages—the ones that one can sociolinguistically observe as being used—consequently rarely matches the vertical distribution of languages as codified in language policies. The dichotomy can be understood by seeing that the State operates within a stratified model of social order, in which it usually assumes a very high

(if not the highest) rank. The State, in other words, is a particular scale-level and it operates in the sense defined above: it silences and excludes phenomena that, horizontally, appear to be core features of the system. In many places in the US, Spanish is horizontally a majority language; vertically, though, it often does not officially exist as “a language of the place.” What happens through this process is that the horizontally distributed languages are (vertically) defined as low-scale languages, local languages or languages used by individuals in the neighborhood or at home, even if such languages are actually used by millions of people. Definitions of “minorities” consequently situate the groups they target at particular (sub-State) scale-levels, and every form of language policy can be seen as an attempt towards converting horizontal sociolinguistic phenomena into vertical ones—as language *ranking* in relation to the State’s prescriptions of the sociolinguistic regime.

The State is, apart from the prime language-ranking agency, also often the prime language *codifying* agency. When languages are accepted as official by the State, such languages need to be converted into a literate standard. This again is a form of upscaling, in which the different varieties of that language are downscaled to the rank of local (“vernacular”) varieties, while one variety is upscaled as the neutral, normative one. Forms of language use that are sanctioned by the state (those in the public domain, or in the education system) from that moment onwards develop in relation to that upscaled variety, and are often predictably downscaled as being “substandard” or just not the variety one would wish for a particular function, role, or job. This form of downscaling takes the form of disqualification: particular linguistic resources are defined as not appropriate, valid or acceptable in a particular (State controlled) context.<sup>8</sup> Upscaled language varieties, in contrast, are varieties of entitlement and enfranchisement in relation to the State’s sociolinguistic regime. They allow for the kind of exportability that we saw above, where discourses and language forms became emblematic of elite identities and roles—carrying validity and value across a wide range of contexts. Interestingly, such elite varieties, occupying high ranks in a vertical hierarchy of scales, often appear to be restricted varieties horizontally, with very limited groups actually having access to them. The top of the pyramid is actually narrower than its base. This is the topic of the next point.

#### 4.4. *Global languages localized*

I have already mentioned that in studies of language and globalization, terms such as “world languages” obviously refer to linguistic phenomena

operating at a very high scale-level (the world). The world language *par excellence* is English, and in many parts of the world, English is indeed semiotized as being the emblem of international mobility, success, and prosperity. Language choice in favor of English is often motivated by *mobility*, the desire to “get out of here” and into a more prosperous environment; such motives are particularly acute in the margins of the world system. Such patterns of language choice and motivation are best investigated by attending to four related aspects of the matter:

- (1) what people want;
- (2) what people need;
- (3) what people have and
- (4) what people can get.

Especially in relation to issues (3) and (4) in our list, we see terrible inequalities worldwide. In a recent case study of a township high school near Cape Town, South Africa, we found that nearly all of the students expressed a great desire to learn English (see Blommaert, Huysmans, Muyliaert & Dyers 2005). Witness this fragment from an interview between two Belgian female researchers N and M and learners A and G, both 14-year old girls from the township:

1. N: the rest you don't like? .. Afrikaans euhm .. life orientation: /
2. A: | no  
| I \*don't want to learn  
Afrikaans / I already know . how to talk Afrikaans / I want  
to learn \*English like I can talk with you /
3. N: okay/ because you \*can already speak Afrikaans
4. A: | Afrikaans yes
5. M: so you / you would prefer to .. learn English instead of  
Afrikaans /
6. A: yes I've \*got one English book /
7. M: | yeah
8. A: they .. they try to learn English and they .. they and=and  
Afrikaans
9. M: yeah ..  
(...)
22. M: do you think it is important that you know . \*many languages  
here in South Africa / or .. / to learn many languages
23. G: {(lo) to learn many languages ... is important see:;} [a lot of  
noise in the back, the learners are coming out of the classes]
24. A: but the \*important language for me is \*English
25. M: that's the most important language to you / and why /

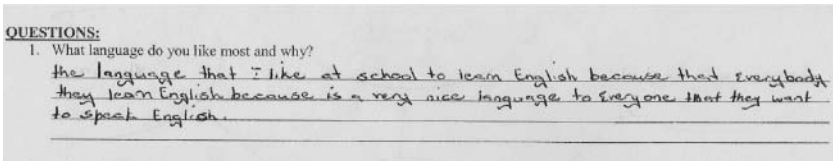
(3s)

26. A: I don't know why

27. N: is it maybe because most of the people can understand it

28. A: yes

Such discourses in which English was placed at the absolute top of the language-and-social hierarchy were, as said, very widespread. Students also expressed them in questionnaire responses, as in the following example:



The pupil here writes:

“the language that I like at school to learn English because that Everybody they learn English because is a very nice language to Everyone that they want to speak English.”

The situation is tragically clear: the township pupils—overwhelmingly black or “coloured” and poor—pin their hopes for upward social mobility on English; but *this particular English* (the one they *have*) is not going to allow them to achieve that goal. It is also the only English they *can get*. Their teachers had no mastery of the elite varieties of English, as seen in this example from a questionnaire response by one of the teachers (see Blommaert et al. 2005 for more details):

“Learners feel shy to speak a minority language. Mostly make youse of code switching. Also afraid of stereotyping.”

The point to be made here is that in the society these pupils live in, English seems to exist at different scale-levels. There is a translocal elite having access to prestige spoken and literate varieties (and indeed producing outstanding, Nobel Prize winning products in it). However, there is also a large section of the population that has access only to “substandard” varieties that are only valid *locally*, within particular social spaces and strata in social structure. The “world language,” in other words, exists in at least two scaled forms: one, a genuinely “globalized” English that connects elites worldwide, and another, a very local variety that offers

very little translocal mobility. As said earlier, the second one is horizontally more prominent than the first one, but the first one is vertically dominant.

## 5. Conclusion

What I hope to have shown in the previous section is how the use of scale metaphors can rearrange our objects of study in such a way that we get a clearer and more precise grasp of the way they relate to social structure. As discussed above, the attempt was to provide a more precise understanding of “context,” not only of “contextualization,” and to the extent that we intend to perform sociolinguistic studies that have a degree of sociological realism, the model of society we use should be as close as possible to the real thing: a system full of inequalities, in which people and actions develop on or across different scale-levels, and in which moves across such scale-levels are moves within a power regime.

One of the things we have seen in the examples is how differences in scales create blind spots or invisible spaces. The asylum seeker had no way of anticipating what would happen to his story in the next stage of the application procedure, on the next scale-level; the interviewer clearly was well aware of that. Similarly, the State’s language policies could make real sociolinguistic phenomena invisible, even if they were very prominent empirically. And the pupils in the township high school near Cape Town knew that there was a thing called English, but had no way of acquiring the globalized and globalizing elite variety of it from within their township environment. Those phenomena of unequal access to sociolinguistic resources and their dynamics of distribution and control cannot be adequately captured in horizontal metaphors of spread and distribution; they need to be imagined as stratified, layered and unequal phenomena that reveal systemic features of (unequal) social structure. Scale is a concept that invites this imagery, and it offers the additional advantage that it allows us to understand that reality, seen from within one scale-level, is quite different from reality seen from within another scale-level. Eric Hobsbawm described this as the “Fabrice Syndrome:”

There are perfectly sound reasons why participants at the bottom do not usually see historic events they live through as top people or historians do. One might call this (after the hero of Stendhal’s *Chartreuse de Parme*) the ‘Fabrice Syndrome’ (Hobsbawm 1983: 13n).

This Fabrice Syndrome is not only an observed phenomenon in history, like in Hobsbawm’s argument, but also in sociolinguistics: a portion of

sociolinguistic resources is only visible, hearable and understandable to those who are located in spaces where these resources circulate and have value.

Under conditions of globalization, the increase of sociolinguistic complexity in urban environments due to migration and diaspora can only lead to an increase of such blind spots. The presupposability of linguistic resources, competences, and actual skills is considerably reduced, and more and more people find themselves in spaces where their linguistic baggage has very unclear value. Such processes of the reshuffling of value and function for linguistic resources are poorly understood, and concepts such as “flow” and “trajectories” do not adequately explain them. Even less explanatory value is derived from concepts such as “fragmentation” or “hybridity.” All of these concepts draw on horizontal spatial metaphors; what we need is a set of vertical spatial metaphors, in which processes of spread and distribution are seen as necessarily accompanied by processes of *ordering* in a system that revolves around the non-equivalence of its elements. Scale, I suggest, is a concept that offers such a vertical, power-saturated, spatial metaphor for sociolinguistic phenomena and processes.

## Notes

1. Thanks, as usual, to Jim Collins and Stef Slembrouck for inspiration and critical debate on these issues, and to Henk Meert for feeding me with important insights and references from social geography. I lost a dear friend when Henk passed away in 2006. My understanding of these matters is largely influenced by the work reported in Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck (2005a; 2005b) as well as work on language, space and inequality in townships around Cape Town, undertaken in the context of the VLIR-IUC program “Dynamics of Building a Better Society” with the University of the Western Cape, South Africa.
2. One can observe how much of the stock terminology of sociolinguistics is scalar. Terms such as “world language” suggest a particular scale-level for the linguistic phenomena it describes; the same goes for “dialect” and “sociolect.”
3. Note that the two directions of indexicality, presupposing and entailing, also impose a *continuous* progressive frame on communication. Communicative events are not necessarily finished when the last speaker has shut his/her mouth, they can and do lead a long life afterwards as intertextual stuff which can in principle be infinitely re-entextualised and shifted from one scale to another. In fact, what we understand by “globalized” in communication is often a post-hoc higher-scale re-entextualisation of local, situated and bounded events. As when a celebrity kisses a new and unknown lover in a restaurant in Beverly Hills (a local, situated, inter-individual event with clear boundaries) and finds pictures of that kiss splashed on the front pages of tabloids around the world a day later. This restriction of communicative events to the situated, bounded aspect of their existence is one of the weaknesses of interactional analysis (see Blommaert 2005a for discussion).



4. Fairclough (1989) offers numerous examples of such depersonalizing discourse moves, and accurately interprets them as forms of discursive power. The indexical direction in all of these examples is the one described here: from a lower, subjective, scale-level (my own individual problem) to a higher, objective, scale-level (the rules and norms for attending to such problems).
5. Observe how many of the phenomena captured under the term “footing” would involve such shifts in scale, in which the interaction is re-placed, re-situated on a different scale-level, triggering rich and complex transformations in indexicality (Goffman 1980).
6. There is a rich meta-theoretical series of issues here, in which one could consider the way in which central concepts from the study of language are scaled concepts. Think of “language” itself, conceived as stable and transcontextual artefactualized structure, and as opposed to *parole* or similar concepts identifying lower-scale language forms-of-occurrence. For reasons of space, these issues will not be addressed here. The reader can turn to Blommaert (2006a, 2006b) for discussions of such artefactualized images of language.
7. Bolinger’s seminal *Neutrality, Norm and Bias* (1977) has been inspirational here, as it shows how everyday terms (such as “old” in “how old are you” versus “how young are you”) are subject to very similar processes of intertextual asymmetry.
8. See Jacquemet (1992) for examples of disqualification of Italian “dialects” in court proceedings. Blommaert, Creve & Willaert (2006) discuss the disqualification of refugee children’s linguistic resources in Dutch immersion classes in Belgium.

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