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(Un)doing regimentation in reflexive practices: on-site processes of sociolinguistic differentiation – a commentary

Abstract: This article discusses Volume 42(6) where the editors (Gilles Merminod and Raymund Vitorio) push for a metapragmatic approach to reflexive practices of sociolinguistic differentiation. With reference to my own trajectory, I review this lens as suitable to accounting for how people affectively take part in the making of difference and similarities between signs, social situations and positions in daily meaning-making practices and the larger inequalities that these practices may contribute to sustain and interrogate. In doing so, I focus on story-telling templates in professional communication, citizenship narratives in research interviews, English-oriented forms of self-evaluation in the workplace and ritualised instances of self-presentation in interaction and evaluations of others' self-presentation in networking events as indexical signs that articulate a range of moralised meanings and categories of "ideal" versus "non-ideal" social persona upon which arrangements of social life and work get (re)instituted. I also discuss the socioeconomic hierarchies and forms of distinction that such arrangements (re)produce in different settings. Finally, I suggest further epistemological avenues for research exploring linkages across events and for following more closely the consequences that such events have for certain people, with attention to existing disciplinary synergies (and social theories) within and beyond the language disciplines.

Keywords: reflexive language; metapragmatics; social inequality

My explicit engagement with reflexivity and reflexive language as areas of inquiry did not begin as a PhD researcher. Nor did this spark a salient interest in me during my time as postdoctoral fellow in the years that followed. It would take me longer to explore more closely this strand of scholarship. I had just taken an assistant professorship post at the Faculty of Education, in The University of Hong Kong (HKU, hereafter), when a brilliant doctoral student for whom I was his subsidiary supervisor came into my office to explain why he thought language and communication

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research was not entirely adequate to account for society at large. Coming from a sociological background, my student had a very strong view about it, a critical realist ontological view, to be more specific. He was highly influenced by the work of sociologist Margaret Archer who for some time has argued for the need to displace language and discourse from the centre of the stage, after decades of intellectual domination inherited from the linguistic and the discursive turns in the wider social sciences (e.g., Archer 2007).

My student's position on the matter was, therefore, far from idiosyncratic. Instead, it was anchored in long-standing critiques of sociological theories of structuration that have called for a separation of structure and agency since these, such critiques argue, should be conceptualised as belonging to different realms – i.e., they are better studied independently one from another (Archer 2003, 2010, 2012). The epistemological ramifications of this are vast, for such a position paves the way for interview-based research whereby what is talked about at an interview is taken as a transparent window to meaning – i.e., it is seen as something that is not shaped by social relations and by the ways in which these relations get invoked, negotiated and challenged communicatively over the course of the interview as a socially situated encounter. Most importantly, this epistemic stance is underpinned by an understanding of reflexivity as an "individual power", echoing Archer's (2007) work, a meta-reflexive mode that provides the individual with a key guide of action in the shaping of her life towards the present and future when dominant modes of socialisation of the past are no longer the main point of reference (Archer: 206–248).

The conversation with my student in Hong Kong continued over a period of months. As his subsidiary supervisor who had just taken up a new assistant professional post there was a limit to how I could shape his project and views and, yet, our interactions were extremely productive, or at least they were for me. They pushed me to re-examine more closely the disciplinary histories of language-based research in its attempts to situate the study of language as a social terrain that, in Heller's (1999) words, is always about something else. Further to this point, my engagement with this student helped me see more clearly the relevance of a sociolinguistic/linguistic anthropological lens in making sense of what, at the time, I was *becoming part of* in my own research in Hong Kong. As I embarked on a 5-year research journey with Carlos Soto, my research collaborator, a network of social workers, school teachers, community activists and youngsters who were governmentally considered "ethnic minorities" in that context – and who we worked with – had socialised each other (including ourselves) into *ways of doing and being* which entailed the collective regrouping of a set of semiotic practices socially recognised within such network as emblematic of *doing ethnic minority activism* (Pérez-Milans 2018; Pérez-Milans and Soto 2016; Soto and Pérez-Milans 2018).

As such, social actions within this network were mediated by communicative practices that enabled the daily making of the network itself; they turned such actions and the social personae associated with them into recognisable/intelligible behavioural templates (Cameron 2000; Rampton 2006) upon which social relations and institutional collaborations were (re)arranged in specific ways, with real and material consequences for the people involved. Some adults in this network, indeed, lost their jobs in spaces that accommodated social critique as long as it was not too radical. Others contributed to build larger webs of actors and circulating forms of knowledge that drew on principles of solidarity and enabled alternative ways of being and doing deemed unintelligible against the background of normative frameworks in institutional spaces of the State. And not only that, the performance of doing ethnic minority activism allowed some of our young participants to access elite educational institutions that offered full scholarships to socioeconomically margin-alised ethnic minority youth labelled as "highly committed to social justice and inequality", despite the very existence of such institutions contributing greatly to systemic forms of inequality in a highly hierarchized educational context such as that of Hong Kong.

Carlos Soto and I could have told this story by leaving language and communi-cation out of the picture, and, in fact, I could imagine my critical realist PhD student at HKU doing this beautifully if/when communicating this research to other critical realist sociologists. But what is it that we would have gained/lost if doing so, with what effect on the portrayal of our research participants' lived experiences/practices as they tried to unsettle language politics and practices? How would our subsequent collaborations and conversations with these participants have looked like if we had moved meaning-making practices and processes out of focus? What is it that we would have contributed to what they already knew as highly politicized actors, in our collaborations and conversations with them? These concerns, I believe, are central in this Special Issue, for contributors take *indexicality of language* (e.g., Hanks 1999; Silverstein 2003) as a key building block in their arguments, thus showing how language use mediates wider ideological configurations – about social situations and people – and the inequalities that these may contribute to sustain and interrogate in the larger scheme of things. But this is not a straightforward approach, and Mer-minod and Vitorio (this volume) operationalise a multi-layered framework to this end.

In their introduction to this volume, Merminod and Vitorio take as their entry point the aim of revisiting "the role of reflexivity in sociolinguistic research about differentiation by examining people's *in situ* attempts to propose, challenge, affirm, or reconfigure indexicalities and social relations" (Merminod and Vitorio, this vol-ume). This is so because, as Lucy (1993) put it long ago: "speech is permeated by reflexive activity as speakers remark on language, report utterances, index and

describe aspects of the speech event, invoke conventional names, and guide listeners in the proper interpretation of their utterances. This reflexivity is so pervasive and essential that we can say that language is, by nature, fundamentally reflexive" (Lucy 1993: 11). Expanding on this, Merminod and Vitorio then direct our attention to metapragmatic discourse or, in other words, to discourse that describes language use and accounts for the pragmatics of a (set of) sign(s) or communicative practice(s), since it is here that reflexivity meets a metapragmatic function:

> it allows those taking part in the process of communication to plan, evaluate or control the contextual appropriateness of what they or the others are doing as well as the contextual appropriateness of how they are doing it. Consequently, attending to metapragmatic discourse enables researchers to investigate not only how reflexivity regiments language use by reproducing and strengthening existing axes of differentiation but also how it can empower language users by enable them to reconfigure or tackle regimenting indexicalities (Merminod and Vitorio, this volume).

More than describing indexicalities in the abstract, Merminod and Vitorio invite us to attend to how people take part in the making of difference and similarities between signs, social situations and positions in daily meaning-making practices, which they refer to as processes of *sociolinguistic differentiation*, following Gal (2016, but see also Gal and Irvine 1995, 2019; Irvine and Gal 2000). They are also interested in the material embedding of all these symbolic (i.e., ideational) practices of difference making, for which they propose a combination of metapragmatic concepts and ethnographically informed approaches. This, they argue, offers a suitable way to "lift the veil on the very embedding of metapragmatic discourse in the social and material world—an embedding that enables or prevents sociolinguistic differentiation" (Merminod and Vitorio, this volume). And if such an embedding matters, then social actors' affective orientations to (symbolic and material) objects can hardly be disregarded as they too are mediated by difference-making practices that help (re)organise social life and relations in particular ways. Ahmed's (2010) discussion on the feelings brought about by the idea of happiness – and the social and moral distinctions that often come with such an idea – is particularly suitable at this point:

> Feelings do not then simply reside within subjects and then move outward toward objects. Feelings are how objects create impressions in shared spaces of dwelling [and thus we should explore] how we are directed by the promise of happiness, as the promise that happiness follows if we do this or that. The promise of happiness is what makes certain objects proximate, affecting how the world gathers around us (Ahmed 2010: 14).

The affordances of a framework such as this are visible in the contributions by Gilles Merminod, Eleanor Yue Gong, Raymund Vitorio and Jacqueline Militello. Although from various research positions – and in relation to distinct sociolinguistic processes

of differentiation, they all shed light on the political, economic and historical conditions under which specific sets of linguistic and interactional signs are reflexively associated with (or disassociated from) particular configurations of social meanings and forms of personhood as these get invoked, negotiated and disputed by social actors in situated communicative events and institutional settings. Whether in the form of story-telling templates by publishing industries preoccupied with professional communication (Merminod, this volume), citizenship narratives in research interviews (Vitorio, this volume), English-oriented forms of self-evaluation in the workplace (Gong, this volume), or ritualised instances of self-presentation in interaction and evaluations of others' self-presentation in networking events (Militello, this volume), these indexical signs articulate in each research site a range of moralised meanings and categories of "ideal" versus "non-ideal" social persona upon which arrangements of social life and work get (re)instituted as well as the socio-economic hierarchies and forms of distinction that such arrangements (re)produce.

For Gong and Merminod, these are crystallised in the "(non-)new worker" in China and the "(non-)persuasive professional communicator" in French-speaking Europe, categories of personhood associated with meanings that make individuals responsible for their (lack of) professional success, in alignment with the political rationality brought about by the neoliberal management of labour (Duchêne and Heller 2012). Against the background of de-regulatory reforms that in most centres of global capitalism have replaced the historical commitment of the welfare system to "full employment" with that of "full employability" – therefore deresponsibilising the State and employers from having to provide those they govern and/or employ with lasting and secure jobs, individuals' capacity to become employable is then explained as depending on their willingness to be flexible and adaptable to a changing, unstable and precarious labour market while engaging relentlessly in updating and improving their knowledge and skills (Rose 1989; for a discourse-base angle, see also Holborow 2015; Block 2018). These individuals are responsibilised for the labour market conditions that they find themselves in, while governments and employers are positioned as just "enablers" that maximize individuals' abilities and choices in the increasingly transnationalised labour market without guaranteeing a job. Further to this, such conditions drive workers and professionals' orientations towards desired objects in ways that require a great deal of reflexive communicative (self)regulation through reimagining, defining, and embarking on desirable outcomes, future aspirations and life projects (Codó and Patiño-Santos 2018; Garrido and Sabaté-Dalmau 2020; Lorente 2017; Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2019; Pérez-Milans and Guo 2020).

In the case of the "new worker" in China discussed by Gong, this rationality becomes indissociable from the idea of English as a key emblem of the successful professional that shape workers' affective orientations. In particular, this figure of

personhood is linked to the mastery of the English language as part of a bundle of skills that workers are expected to reflexively orient to and acquire in order to access (and navigate) the labour market (see also Urciuoli 2008, 2019; Park 2011; Sunyol and Codó 2018). As for the "persuasive professional communicator" in French-speaking Europe, the conditions of recognisability of this social persona within the professional communities of business and political communication relies on meta-pragmatic models of communication, or narrative ideologies, whereby ways of telling are connected by convention to types of social situations. While these models have for decades allowed researchers to adequately analyse what is worth telling by whom and to whom, through what means, where, when, why and to what purposes, Merminod reminds us, it has also laid out the ground for a blooming industry that profits from the packaging of such models into storytelling guides. In the name of "effective communication", these guides regiment the telling of stories into specific domains of social life, a valuable skill that, as Adams et al. (2009) would state, prepares the professional individual for a "regime of anticipation" – i.e., an orientation to future scenarios with endless possibilities to effectively mobilise ready-made stories suitable to distinct professional groups in a range of work-related and public-speaking situations.

But the social intelligibility of communicative templates does not preclude creative forms of social action, affect and social relation. Inasmuch as English-related forms of self-evaluation or storytelling guides are socially recognised as emblems of professional success within the confines of the professional communities studied by Gong and Merminod, these "scripts" (Cameron 2000) may also be reflexively manipulated to reconfigure normative indexical meanings in unexpected ways. This is precisely the type of exploration offered by Vitorio and Militello when they drive our attention to communicative forms of self-presentation and evaluation of others' self-presentation vis-à-vis the categories of the "(il)legitimate new citizen" and "(un)valuable professional contact" that emerge as such communicative forms are enacted and negotiated in the everyday life of Singapore and Hong Kong. Vitorio takes citizenship narratives as the entry point to examining how often seen as contradictory forms of self-presentation get rearticulated by new citizens as they enter the labour market of Singapore and resolve the dilemmas brought about by governmental policies that grant citizenship.

As the political economy of the country relies on immigration to increase its human capital, its most important economic asset to remain globally competitive given Singapore's lack of natural resources, the government's decision to only require from citizenship applicants good character, residency, intention to reside in Singapore permanently, and basic competence in one of the four official languages, has fuelled anxieties and discontents among its local-born population over the perception that the country is receiving too many migrants. As a result, Vitorio's

analysis reveals how new citizens have reflexively reconfigured perceivable markers of "globalness" and "localness" that supposedly make them different from their local-born counterparts. In contrast to dominant discourses that contrast the global and the local by way of associating the former with "mobility" and the latter with "rootedness" – thus potentially turning economic migrants into illegitimate citizens, these social actors perform legitimate citizenship through narrations of their life journeys in which the indexical meanings linked to "family" and "passports" as object-signs are regrouped to encapsulate both rootedness and mobility as integral parts of being a new citizen of Singapore.

Militello focuses instead on ritualised communicative forms of self-presentation and of evaluations of others' self-presentation in networking events as spaces where professional "elite" identities are made sense of, with material outcomes that, in her view, impact occupational attainment. As a global economic hub that relies heavily on the finance and service industries, access to employment in Hong Kong is often deemed as extremely competitive and, therefore, a door to the exclusive top socioeconomic income band. For this reason, securing a job in one of these two sectors requires strategies of self-monitoring in the context of professional networking events where "professionals connect with new contacts and upon meeting, construe a newly met acquaintance's identity and engage in reflexive activities, assigning value, such as eliteness, based on signals both given and given off" (Militello, this volume). Away from more conventional analysis of shared indexicalities, Militello's attention to instances where people with diverse biographies negotiate shared understandings of the world with which to ascribe social value to unrecognised emblems offers a view to how communicate resources are reflexively deployed to creatively re-enregister (Agha 2007) desired social personae (e.g., an "elite person") via creating previously unknown associations with lexical references to prestigious schools and universities, social club memberships and investment funds, or particular linguistic repertoires, behaviours and demeanours.

Though not explicitly framed in relation to trajectories of socialisation Militello's account helps us to continue imagining epistemological avenues for exploring linkages across events and for following more closely the consequences that such events have for certain people. Her study shows how the professional occupations and emblems of identity that are performed and negotiated by her participants need to be understood with reference to the daily production of socioeconomic privilege in Hong Kong. What's more, this privilege is anchored in rather specific and materialised circuits of professional mobility that connect highly prestigious educational institutions at all levels, neighbourhoods and transnational corporations. Militello may not analyse this specifically, but all nodes in this larger infrastructure are constantly made and re-instantiated through the analysed daily communicative activities. This, I believe, invites us to ask further questions that take us away from

only privileging the event as the locus of our investigations, towards detailed accounts of the larger infrastructural webs of institutions, social actors and forms of knowledge (including categories of personhood) that get built upon the daily making of sociolinguistic differentiation. In fact, this volume as a whole attests to something we all know too well: that social actors' lived experiences are never bounded by isolated moments; instead, their engagement in a given social event has consequences for how people go about, access (or struggle to have access) to other events across space and time as well as to the symbolic and material resources that get distributed in them (e.g., moralised figures of personhood, educational credentials, job positions, access to services granted to recognised citizens).

Certainly, linguistic anthropological work concerned with reflexive language and metapragmatics has provided us with analytical ways to do this, and indeed the study of enregisterment has benefitted from later conceptual developments interested in describing evolving practices and processes through space/time such as that of interdiscursivity (Silverstein 2005), entextualisation (Silverstein and Urban 1996) or trajectories of identification (Wortham and Reyes 2015). But this is also a fruitful terrain for us to look for points of contact across various sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological traditions that have also enquired on how discursive/semiotic practices in institutional spaces get embedded in larger networks and organisational logics, including networks and logics anchored in larger histories of colonialism and racism (e.g., Rosa and Flores 2023; but see also Heller and McElhinny 2017), and this is central to better understanding how things work out for people. Heller et al. (2018) expand further on this when they argue for the significance of an analysis of meanings that prevents a rather unfortunate yet long-standing split between the linguistic and the social orders:

> meanings have histories; they carry echoes from previous encounters. While meaning is "situated", i.e. it is bound to its moment and place of emergence in the singularity of each situation, it is also one moment in a web of encounters that stretch across time and space, beyond the capacity of any single social actor to grasp. This is why we see ethnography as a necessary way to address how social actors act upon the world in specific and singular moments, while tracing the consequences of these moments for the sedimentation of the categories that organize the distribution of resources, and of the activities where they are produced, circulated, consumed and valued (Heller et al. 2018: 5–6).

Perhaps we should not stop here in our attempts to make further links across traditions. After all, we are not alone in our concern with the study of the daily making of social life in the wider social sciences. Encouraged by interactions with my former PhD student in Hong Kong, Margaret Archer's arguments pushed me towards an inward-looking exploration of what a (socially-oriented) language and communication lens has to offer. But many other scholars working interdisciplinarily across

literary studies, geography, anthropology and sociology provide invaluable intellectual synergies for our work to keep engaging with the social world. Expanding our interactions with these traditions may help us further as we don't only displace the attention from a focus on *what is* "efficient" communication, "employable" worker, "legitimate" citizenship, or "elite" professionalism, towards in-depth understandings of the communicative practices and historical logics involved in *how it's done*, but also take on board those who have argued for the relevance of investigating *what these categories do to whom with what logics of social organisation* (Ahmed 2012; Cicourel 1996; Smith 2005).

This is of course just one among many possible avenues but a powerful one to describe those very social processes that we say daily language and communication mediate. It forces us to situate detailed descriptions of practices in larger trajectories of individuals, institutions and groups involved in our research so that we not only identify ideological constructs, or models, but also what they contribute to do. In so doing, we may also bring ourselves into the mix explicitly so that our trajectories, experiences, but also struggles, are not entirely removed from the picture. In relation to the topic of this volume we may ask, for example, the following: what social processes are we speaking to that makes it relevant/significant/unavoidable for us to engage with reflexive language and metapragmatics? I opened this commentary by remarking that I did not engage explicitly with this tradition as a PhD researcher; I did it later in life, in response to specific events as I navigated my own professional career in Hong Kong, and with the aim of finding a point of focus in my conversations and collaborations with my research participants and their evolving network in that context, in 2015.

Ultimately, these issues and questions are aimed for us to always remain open to reflections about the reasons why we engage with the research frameworks we choose, when/where, at the service of what questions at which particular points in our own learning trajectories. More than just constituting a general background, or mere disclaimers, such issues and questions can also help us clarify the very theories of society that inform our work and which we (implicitly or explicitly) speak to.

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