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CHAPTER THREE

Sociolinguistics and the social fact: *Avec* Durkheim

So let us first establish this: people *do* communicate; they communicate all the time, in highly diverse and complex modes, often with more than one interlocutor, and not always logically, economically or rationally; it is through interaction that they are recognized as ‘social’, as a ‘subject’, and as producers of ideas. Affirming this is, of course, of an extraordinary triviality. But this *trivium* has been denied and neglected in tons of sociological and other social-scientific work, turning it not in a truism but into a hard-fought methodological principle. Establishing that principle means affirming the very possibility of a *sociolinguistics*. And I think we have pretty decent empirical back-up for this principle and, thence, for the possibility of sociolinguistics. So let us show some of that evidence in what follows.

I repeat what I mentioned earlier: while almost every major sociologist would emphasize (or at least mention) interaction as a given, detailed attention to interaction has never really been part of the sociological mainstream. Interaction was paid lip service to, and communication is often seen as a set of rudimentary transmission practices not worthy of study in its

own right – something so elementary that it belongs to the décor in which real social action is played out and does not demand further examination.¹ Blumer, defining the methodological position of symbolic interactionism as it was being kept in the margins of the sociology of his time, lamented (1969: 7):

A society consists of individuals interacting with one another. The activities of the members occur predominantly in response to one another or in relation to one another. Even though this is recognized almost universally in definitions of human society, social interaction is usually taken for granted and treated as having little, if any, significance in its own right.

Durkheim was no exception. And this, remarkably, led to generations of sociologists overlooking what is potentially the most self-evident social fact. Let me sketch some aspects of it, and start with the most general one.

3.1 Language as a normative collective system: Ordered indexicality

People can only communicate with others when they share and deploy different forms of ‘grammar’ – conventionalized normative patterns *ordering* the potential mess of symbols we call language, ensuring that we ‘make sense’ to each other. This simple observation should be sufficient to establish it as a Durkheimian social fact *pur sang*.² But let me elaborate this – begging the reader for tolerance for the highly sketchy summary of complex histories of linguistic thought in what follows.

The different forms of grammar can – roughly – be divided into grammars of form and grammars of usage, and usually the term ‘grammar’ is reserved for the former: the fact that the formal, morphosyntactic organization of linguistic expressions is governed by language-specific (i.e. non-individual) rules, compliance with which displays some degree of flexibility but is overall quite strict and relatively stable and enduring.

Description of these formal rules became ‘linguistics’, and their relatively stable and enduring character became the key element in identifying separate ‘languages’ (cf. Silverstein 1977; Irvine 2001; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Blommaert 2013; see Agha 2007a: 222 for a concise discussion). As for grammars of usage, they gradually became a separate domain of study (called ‘Pragmatics’) through the work of language philosophers such as Austin (1962), Grice (1975) and Searle (1969) (cf. Verschueren 1999). Here, too, relatively stable and enduring rules were detected, although the overlap between such rules and separate ‘languages’ was less outspoken. Rules of politeness, for instance, appeared to be connected more to social and cultural groups than to the actual ‘languages’ they use, and were even seen as potentially universal (Brown and Levinson 1987; for a critical appraisal see Eelen 2001). A generation of anthropologists had, in the meantime, provided mountains of literature on the sociocultural embedding of language in specific (often ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’) communities (see Hymes 1964 for a survey), while symbolic-interactionist sociologists in the United States had started exploring the social-scientific significance of everyday patterns of social interaction in their own social environments (e.g. Goffman 1959; Garfinkel 1967; Blumer 1969).

The eminently social fact of grammar, remarkably, became individualized as soon as *universals* became the ambition of linguistic theory, in the wake of Noam Chomsky’s epochal reformulation of linguistics as a science of ‘competence’ – the mentally structured capacity to generate grammatically well-formed sentences (e.g. Chomsky 1965). Chomsky announced that the focus on competence meant that linguists should be concerned with an ‘ideal’ speaker/hearer operating outside of any form of real communicative situation; and this ideal speaker became an *individual* speaker whose ‘language’ existed, in universal ways and (contrary to De Saussure’s view) perfectly, in his or her individual brain (see Katz 1972 for an excellent example and Cicourel 1973, Chapters 3 and 4, for a critique). Methodological Individualism, thus, entered the science of

language through the detour of psychologism, and social and cultural norms were replaced by mental operations unaffected by (socially and culturally contextualized) 'performance'. Language had become an a-social fact.

Modern sociolinguistics was a reaction to that; and from its very beginnings, work in sociolinguistics would struggle to re-establish language as a social fact. Reaching back to the oeuvres of Sapir and Whorf, the abstract language designated as the object of linguistics was countered by situated, contextualized 'speech' and such speech had to be understood in terms of a dialectics of language and social life, lodged in a 'speech community' (Hymes 1966, 1972, 1980; Gumperz 1968, 1982). And apart from a (possibly) mentally hardwired and universal grammatical competence – the *linguistic* system – one should also consider the group-specific and culturally relative communicative competence – the *sociolinguistic* system (Hymes 1992). Communicative competence, note, referred to knowledge of the sociocultural norms of language and the capacity to deploy them adequately in a variety of social circumstances. The norms of language, thus, were defined as sociocultural constructs in a theoretical frame emphasizing action; and Michael Silverstein (again drawing on Whorf) put a gloss on them: 'language ideologies' (Silverstein 1979).

I shall be forgiven for this breathless rush through half a century of intellectual development, for I have arrived now where I wanted to arrive. The concept of language ideologies, which rose to prominence and became a unifying focus in the 1990s (Kroskrity, Schieffelin and Woolard 1992; see Blommaert 2006a for a review), offered a comprehensive framework for revisiting language as a social fact, in nearly all aspects. The central idea proved extraordinarily productive: language is used on the basis of socioculturally grounded conventions dialogically organizing its production and understanding; the empirical basis for such ideologies are concrete 'indexicals', that is features of communicative action pointing in nonrandom ways to salient, context-specific sociocultural meaning reservoirs, and ultimately to social structure (see Agha 2007b;

also De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006; Cicourel 1973 and Gumperz 1982 can be seen as precursors). Indexicals, thus, invoke conventionalized and therefore presupposed histories of meaningful usage (or ‘models’, Gal 2016: 119) and precipitate them into new moments of deployment with active, responsive interlocutors. In Silverstein’s words:

Now any indexical process, wherein signs point to a presupposed context in which they occur (i.e. have occurred) or to an entailed potential context in which they occur (i.e. will have occurred), depends on some metapragmatic function to achieve a measure of determinacy. It turns out that the crucial position of ideologies of semiosis is in constituting such a mediating metapragmatics, giving parties an idea of determinate contextualization for indexicals, presupposable as shared according to interested positions or perspectives to follow upon some social fact like group membership, condition in society, achieved commonality of interests, etc. Ideology construes indexicality. In so doing ideology inevitably biases its metapragmatic ‘take’ so as to create another potential order of effective indexicality that bears what we can appreciate sometimes as a truly ironic relation to the first (1992: 315).

This principle could be applied to the formal grammar of language, which appears subject to strong language-ideological effects (e.g. Silverstein 1979; Errington 1988; Irvine and Gal 2000); to the learning of language norms in socialization processes (e.g. Schieffelin and Ochs 1986); to the use of specific ‘registers’ governing concrete sociocultural domains of speech and subject to processes of incorporation called ‘enregisterment’ (e.g. Agha 2005, 2007b); to patterns of everyday narratives (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006); to lay and institutionalized concepts of language, including sociolinguistic hierarchies and attributed speaker identities (e.g. Silverstein 1996, 1998; Agha 2003) and the politics of language at nation-state level and in more specific institutional

contexts (e.g. Jaffe 1999; Blommaert 1999; Philips 2000; Haviland 2003); to intertextual processes of meaning-making, resemiotization and entextualization (e.g. Silverstein and Urban 1996); to complex contemporary forms of meaning- and identity-making involving codeswitching (e.g. Rampton 1995, 2006). En route, a large number of crucial concepts in the study of language were redefined: language itself, speech community, genre, style (Gal 2016) and so forth: the range of themes, concepts and domains that were profoundly reshaped by the conceptual development of language ideologies is extensive.

The truly fundamental theoretical and methodological impact of language ideologies, in view of the exercise I undertake here, is that it has given us an extraordinarily precise view of norms (and their cognates 'values' and 'collective representations'). Norms, we now see, are language-ideological phenomena produced and enacted in communicative action. They are, more precisely, *ordered indexicalities*: sets of indexicals organized in relation to each other, with some of them being 'emblematic' of the meaning effects they generate – a sort of register 'shibboleth' effect, as when someone starts a sentence with 'oh dear' versus 'fuck' (cf. Silverstein 2003; Agha 2005, 2007b; Blommaert 2005), or shifts into a mock accent so as to project an evaluated identity on someone else (e.g. Hill 2001; Rampton 2006). The fundamentally normative, dialogical and interpreted character of social relations, thus, becomes clear: whenever we interact with others, we produce not just the kinds of denotational meanings one finds in a dictionary, but we produce *evaluative* meanings, in which the words, actions and identities of all the participants are weighed and given (sociocultural) value. And in so doing we produce, moment by moment, 'culture' and 'society', as well as 'identity' and 'meaning'. None of these concepts can be detached from interaction – 'language *and* culture', for instance, have merged into the interactional production of indexical order (Silverstein 2004).

Echoes of Bakhtin and Goffman are evident here: language ideologies can in many ways be seen as an extreme

methodological refinement of the general ideas articulated by Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and Goffman (1971, 1974). Bakhtin's sociohistorical theory of literary form has now been extended into the entire field of language in society, and has acquired far more analytical purchase and precision; while the micro-orders of social conduct described by Goffman can now also be reformulated in a more systematic and generalizable way. I shall come back to the continued relevance of both authors further on; in the case of Goffman, we shall see that, in a wider sense, the programme of symbolic interactionism (and to some extent, of ethnomethodology) is coming back with a vengeance (cf. Blumer 1969; Cicourel 1973; Garfinkel 2002). In addition, and combining Bakhtin with Goffman, ordered indexicalities presuppose, and necessitate, a *dialogical* and *intersubjective* conception of meaning-making that stretches over the entire range of behaviours deployed in what we call 'interaction' or 'communication'. Whenever we communicate, we keep an eye on the other and adjust our communicative behaviour to an anticipated uptake from our interlocutors. In contrast to what Rational Choice suggest, we are quite altruistic and cooperative in communication, and we are happy and eager to accommodate the other in our own language use – as demonstrated whenever we revert to a kind of pidgin English when an obviously confused tourist ask us for directions. Our communicative behaviour is regulated by the fact that it is organized together with others.³

Three final remarks are in order.

- 1 Orders of indexicality are obviously collective, social phenomena. I have qualified them as 'nonrandom' on a couple of occasions already, and this is vital because any form of understanding requires recognizability in terms of a *specific* set of ordered indexicals. An interaction opened with 'excuse me, sir' versus one opened with 'hey, you!' is likely to be a different interaction (probably a difference glossed as 'polite' versus 'impolite'), and recognition of this difference can

only occur when the participants share the language-ideological valuations of these indexicals. And they do. A study by Silverstein (2015) on public (online) discussions of New York accent showed remarkable similarities in several categories of valuations given by participants, something that corroborates Penelope Eckert's (2008, 2012) notion of 'indexical fields'. Linguistic variation, it now appears, is subject to powerful collective language-ideological forces ('We have come to see variation as a more robust and dynamic indexical system' – Eckert 2015: 43; also Rampton 2006, 2016a). Section 3.2 will return to this.

- 2 People display an outspoken tendency to *create* norms whenever they are absent or unclearly scripted, and new communication technologies provide us with plenty of examples of that. The extremely rapid development of new social media platforms and apps, one can say, presents their users with a situation of anomie each time they engage with such novelties. And whereas common wisdom would often qualify mobile phone texting codes and Facebook interactions as 'anything goes' because the carefully indoctrinated school standards of language and script appear to be violated continuously, a more concentrated analysis shows that even such apparently open, highly diverse, free and unscripted communicative spaces are very rapidly filled with ad hoc (and rapidly solidified) norms, defining modes of interaction, genres and styles, and subject to sometimes rigorous policing. These new norms can and do function as tools for evading or subverting imposed, top-down rules when existing rules are experienced as oppressive (e.g. Varis and Wang 2011; Wang, Juffermans and Du 2012; Blommaert 2012; Leppänen and Elo 2016; Du 2016; Stæhr 2017). As said before, anomie may be defined

as a space without norms; at the same time, it is also a space where *new* norms are invited, demanded and manufactured – a creative space in which ‘the social’, as grounded in the sharedness of sets of norms, is instantly shaped. To rephrase this with reference to Rational Choice: we see in this phenomenon of instant, grassroots norm-creation how people continuously surrender their individual choice and freedom to joint patterns of regulation and policing. Because they do not want to get stuck talking to just themselves, one can imagine.

- 3 While ordered indexicals organize and generate ‘meaning’, such meanings are not just ‘rational’, that is denotational, but also, and simultaneously, aesthetic and dramatic. In fact, when people communicate, they perform a bundle of functions: epistemic, affective, poetic, performative (Hymes 1980; Haviland 1989; Bauman and Briggs 1990). And it is this bundle – not just its epistemic aspect – that turns communication into something that satisfies higher-order social and cultural demands (Hymes 1966, 1996; Silverstein 1985, 1997, 2004; Blommaert 2006b, 2015c). We convince others not just by the pureness and truth-conditional excellence of our argument, but even more by the stylistic-narrative performance in which it is cast and by the evaluative key in which we frame it; and we pay meticulous attention to all of this while we build our argument. In the view of Charles Goodwin (2007), there is something inherently moral in epistemic practices, since the latter demand a tightly organized set of moves within a chosen participant framework, rupture of which is seen as a moral as well as an epistemic issue (cf. also Goodwin 1994). This simple observation blows out of the water any theory in which human communication is reduced to the rational exchange of pure (and perfectly

retrievable) meanings. To put it somewhat crudely and in folksy terms: human rationality is very much tied up with, in practice even indistinguishable from, human *irrationality* – emotion, morality and aesthetics. We are very subjective when we believe we are objective and can get quite emotional when we discuss ‘the facts’.⁴

I have used a lot of space discussing this first element – language as a normative collective system, now understood through the conceptual instruments of language ideologies – for it underlies several of the points that follow. I can treat these points somewhat more concisely now.

3.2 Language variation: Dialects, accents and languaging

I have already mentioned above (pace Eckert) that language variation is now seen as an indexical system of distinction. Language is the great diversifier: even the smallest feature can serve as an emblem of fundamental identity difference (Rampton 1995; Blommaert 2015b). But let us start where we have to start: with the features that index such distinctions, language variation itself.

Recall the elements that Durkheim identified as defining the social fact: social facts (a) were phenomena that transcended the control of the individual and (b) had a compelling, normative effect on individuals. Now consider a straightforward case: all over the world, people learn a language we call English; they do so, in formal education, on the basis of a corpus of teaching materials that are amazingly similar (in fact, they can be seen as standardized industrial mass products). Yet all over the world, and in spite of the near-uniform input, people speak English *with an accent*. These accents are clearly identifiable: few would not be able to tell the difference between, say, an ‘American’ accent and a ‘French’ one, and many would be

able to distinguish an ‘Indian’ accent from a ‘Nigerian’ one. In fact, such distinctions have led to the development of a branch of applied linguistics called ‘World Englishes’ (e.g. Bhatt 2001; also Pennycook 2007; Seargeant 2009; Mufwene 2010), where different regional realizations of English are no longer seen as deviations from ‘standard’ English but as bona fide language varieties in their own right, often with names such as ‘Hinglish’ (Hindi-English: Kothari and Snell 2011) or more generically ‘country name + English’, as in ‘Brunei English’. The range of ‘typical’ features, for instance in Brunei English, is extensive and stretches from phonetics and morphosyntax into discursive and lexical differences. The explanations for such differences are usually sought in influences from language contact with ‘native’ language substrates, the specific history of English in the region, the local or regional language policies and the education system (Deterding and Sharbawi 2013). In the case of Hinglish, apart from these factors, the influence and prestige of a powerful Hindi-language popular culture is also noted (Kothari 2011). (Observe that we are addressing a globalization phenomenon here, and I shall return to this.)

The fact, however, remains the same. People growing up and living in specific regions of the world acquire features of speech that are distinctly, and identifiably, regional – ‘from there’. These features – accents – are extraordinarily powerful identity shibboleths; in fact the word ‘shibboleth’ itself refers to a biblical story in which accent in speech was used to distinguish allies from enemies (and to kill the latter, appropriately identified). And getting rid of an acquired accent is quite a slow, difficult and sometimes painful job, for which, in the meantime, a branch of specialized therapists and providers has emerged (cf. Blommaert 2008a; Silverstein 2015). Variation in speech, we can see, is not something one typically chooses – it is acquired through socialization processes, that is through a shared history in a community in which the fine distinctions of speech are learned and embodied. Those are phenomena that transcend the individual, no one really *owns* them.

As for their compelling, normative effects, we must keep earlier remarks in mind and turn to a venerable branch of sociolinguistics: social dialectology in the tradition of Peter Trudgill.⁵ Drawing on Britain and Cheshire (2003a), several points are worth noting.

- 1 *Collective identity* appears to be the main driver guiding the dynamics of dialect. More specifically, dialect, however defined, is a shibboleth for regional identity, that is a recognizable identity shared by people inhabiting a particular region, currently or in the past; dialect indexes the local and the regional (also Johnstone 2010; Silverstein 2015).
- 2 Identity issues also govern innovation and change. The latter depend strongly on *degrees of social integration*. The better people are integrated in the community, the more they will contribute to innovation in dialect, due to the tendency to index specific sub-groups within that community. Social isolation – as with for example spatially isolated ‘outliers’ in poorly populated areas – slows down the patterns of change in dialects (Britain 2003).
- 3 ‘Dialect levelling’ – a well-known feature in dialectology, in which dialects appear to develop in a more convergent way, depends on social factors as well: *speech accommodation* between speakers of different dialectal backgrounds (Kerswill 2003).
- 4 The tendency to index specific subgroups through dialect innovation highlights (a) the heterogeneity of dialect ‘speech communities’ and (b) the importance of ‘loose social networks’ (Watts 2003; also Silverstein 2016) in language change.
- 5 Throughout all of the above, ‘social categories are ... seen as ideologically-driven processes’ (Britain and Cheshire 2003b: 4): the dynamics of dialect change is governed by language-ideological attributions –

the normative and identity-projecting phenomena discussed in the previous section (also Rampton 2009; Gal 2016).

The latter can be observed in yet another dimension of language change: *linguaging*, the extraordinarily creative mixing and blending of linguistic and expressive resources typical of sociolinguistically highly complex environments (Jørgensen 2008; Creese and Blackledge 2010; Jørgensen et al. 2016; Juffermans 2015; Madsen, Karrebæk and Møller 2015; Blommaert and Rampton 2016). While linguaging, at first sight, appears like unregulated bricolage or mash-up business or a kind of communicative anomie (and is often so perceived by those in charge of guarding the gates of language correctness), a closer look reveals a tremendous level of structuring, all of it governed language-ideologically by delicate shifts in (identity) ‘footing’, alignment between speakers and changes in the participant framework. Needless to say that current social media usage displays a phenomenal amount of such forms of linguaging in new forms of graphic practice (e.g. Tagliamonte 2015; Du 2016).

The bricolage can, in effect, reveal differences between locally constructed and discernible varieties (Kailoglou 2015; Madsen 2017; also Rampton 2011), and can be a powerful instrument for ‘styling’ specific identities – ironically, ritually, playfully, or quite seriously (Rampton 1995, 2006; Coupland 2007, 2015; Cutler 2009). The more serious forms of styling may revolve around highly ritualized minimal displays of a ‘heritage language’, with tremendous identity-establishing effects (e.g. Moore 2017). And ‘quite seriously’ can also mean ‘making money’, of course: the commodification of language variation in new economic sectors – think of tourism, marketing and call centres as examples – has turned sociolinguistics into the profitable exchange of more than just symbolic capital (Heller 2010; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Blommaert 2010; Kelly-Holmes 2010; Woydack 2017).

3.3 Inequality, voice, repertoire

In discussing language, I have already pointed to the linguistic and expressive resources that people use in such complex forms of discursive work. Such resources are, of course, not evenly distributed in any society, and the reasons for this are social.⁶ Hymes (1996: 26–7) stated this problem clearly: while language obviously offers a pool of opportunities to people, it simultaneously acts as a *constraint*; it is a human social treasure trove as well as a human social problem, since no single person knows all of a language, and meeting the limits of what we can communicate is an acutely frustrating social experience for all of us. Throughout life, we continuously acquire new sets of resources while we shed older, obsolete ones; and in its most general sense, we are always constrained by what is communicable and what is not – we often have no words for what needs to be expressed.⁷ But let me focus on two specific elements by way of illustration: (1) access to specific register and genre resources and (2) access to specific contexts for communication.

- 1 In general, and contrary to the suggestion of the ideal (or ‘native’) speaker/hearer, no real human being has access to all the resources that circulate socially, for several reasons. There can be institutional barriers reserving ‘elite’ resources for a small group of people, creating effective hierarchical patterns of access to what Bourdieu (1982) called ‘legitimate language’ – and access to ‘standard’ English in large parts of the world is a case in point (Park and Wee 2012; Blommaert 2010, 2014). People have easy access to spoken vernacular varieties of English widespread in global popular culture and open to informal learning – which is why words such as ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ occur almost everywhere – while literacy-based standard varieties are far more difficult (and expensive) to obtain, and specialized registers such as legal-bureaucratic,

literary or academic varieties even more so, since they demand access to effectively policed formal learning channels and ‘members only’ communities of users. Thus, illiterate people are likely never to produce written discourse, and not because of choice but because of social-institutional structural reasons. And there are many misunderstandings that are grounded not in an individual’s poor choice of words but in an asymmetrical degree of communicative competence between speakers (Gumperz 1982 is a classic; also Roberts 2016). Processes of access restriction are not necessarily ‘institutional’ though: similar forms of gatekeeping occur almost everywhere. Howard Becker’s (1963) *Outsiders* described how ‘marginal’ social groups such as marihuana-smoking jazz musicians also deploy tactics of selection and exclusion through specific modes of talk distinguishing ‘those in the know’ from newcomers or ignorant ‘outsiders’. Much of the literature on styling and languaging reviewed earlier addresses exactly such small peer-group identity dynamics in which group-specific, exclusive, enregistered phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and genre features are made emblematic of membership and eligibility (cf. Silverstein 2006; Blackledge and Creese 2016).

- 2 As to restrictions of access to specific contexts, again, nobody has access to all available contexts that make up the communicative economies of societies. This is again clearest in institutional contexts, where, for instance, defendants and witnesses in courts have no access to the context of verdict-making, which is exclusively reserved for the judges. More generally, expert contexts are often decisive in social life, while they are tightly controlled on a ‘members only’ basis by the experts themselves (e.g. Cicourel 1967; Briggs 1997, 2005; Mehan 1996).

We often have no impact on what others do with our words in patterns of re-textualization we call ‘text trajectories’, in which a subject’s statement is recorded by someone, summarized in a report by someone else for yet someone else, who takes a decision which is then moved down the trajectory and fed back to the subject – as in bureaucratic procedures or newspaper interviews (e.g. Blommaert 2001). Obviously, access to such restricted contexts is already conditioned by (1) above: one needs specific forms of language and literacy proficiency in order to enter such social spaces. And in a world in which large chunks of communication demand access to hi-tech ICT equipment and infrastructures, such inequalities display no tendencies to disappear (Wang et al. 2014).

Both forms of inequality would operate across the spectre of the sociolinguistic system, but of course, some would be subject to more outspoken and structural forms of exclusion and marginalization than others. Hymes himself focused on the predicament of Native American groups, and speakers of small, minority or immigrant languages are, evidently, in structurally weaker positions than speakers of majority and prestigious varieties – recent sociolinguistics has provided an avalanche of work on these themes (for an elaborate case study, see the essays in Blommaert et al. 2012). Thus, sociolinguistic inequalities characterize every social system, and the causes for such inequalities are social. Hymes (1996) coined the term ‘voice’ for the actual capacity of people to make themselves understood and noted that problems of voice represent the critical dimension of sociolinguistic work: rather than merely describing sociolinguistic diversity as a kind of juxtaposition of equally valuable varieties, we should engage with the question as to why particular varieties are, in actual fact, not equal to others – questions of voice as a sociopolitical given, voice as the reflection of social structures in the actual communicative

abilities of people (cf. Blommaert 2005, 2008b; Van der Aa 2012; Scott 2013).

The latter move involves and presupposes attention to *repertoires*: the actual resources people have acquired and can effectively deploy in communication. The notion of repertoire has only recently been made into a topic of profound reflection, often from an awareness that widespread qualifications such as ‘speaker of language X’, or even ‘(non)native speaker of language X’ are entirely inadequate as descriptors of the tremendous diversity in degrees of proficiency and communicative ability people display (e.g. Blommaert and Backus 2013; Rymes 2014; Busch 2015). Repertoires are by definition uniquely individual and can be described as ‘indexical biographies’ reflecting the social experiences of people with specific orders of indexicality – exposure, immersion, learning, informal acquisition – and the ways in which such experiences reflect the social order and inscribe individuals into a wide variety of group memberships. What is in people’s repertoires is usually there for a good reason: because they needed it at some point in social life. In that sense, repertoires are traces of social norms, or if you wish, traces of the compelling and often even coercive and consequential evaluative responses of others in our lives – traces of power, in short. Taking that to the theoretical level: repertoires once more show how becoming and being a unique individual is a fundamentally social process – socialized, dialogical, normative, dynamic.

Facts of sociolinguistic distribution, we can see, shape a field of power and are reproduced by it, and turn language, in its various manifestations, into a heavily policed object in which potentially every difference can be turned into a consequential form of inequality. The term ‘voice’, as used here, points towards this consequentiality: the normative organization of language – notably the tendency to standardize forms of language and language usage into highly politically sensitive templates – affects the life chances of people, and sociolinguistics has brought a wealth of evidence to this point. Specifically through the lens of sociolinguistic analysis,

we can observe in great detail the way in which an infinitely fractal system of normativity – indexicals and their forms of order – turns into a capillary power structure in Foucault's (2015) sense, with on the one end elaborate formal and institutional systems of 'language testing' (e.g. Extra, Spotti and Van Avermaet 2011; Spotti 2016),⁸ and on the other end the minute-by-minute evaluative judgements of people's communicative actions by their interlocutors in everyday life.

3.4 Language, the social fact

If Durkheim would have attended more closely to language and how it operates in and through society, he would have had considerably less trouble establishing his *fait social*. Half a century of sociolinguistics has proven, at great length and in infinite detail, that language can *only* be explained as a social fact – other explanations are absurd. Particularly absurd, we can conclude quite confidently, is Rational Choice. Almost everything that has been brought up by sociolinguists flatly contradicts the central assumptions of Rational Choice and offers loads of hard and conclusive empirical evidence for this contradiction. The worldview of Rational Choice, from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, is that of a world populated by people who only talk to themselves.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of sociolinguistics, and its most important contribution to sociological theory, is the highly detailed and precise view of *normativity* I discussed in Section 3.1. The 'norms', 'values' and 'collective representations' that characterize the Durkheimian (and Parsonian) assumptions about integration and social coherence are given a feet-on-the-ground realism as continuously evolving, dialogically constructed social actions in which meaning, in the traditional linguistic sense, is entirely blended with sociocultural, intersubjective evaluations of a moral nature, precipitating what we call 'identity'. Identity is not a product, nor an *a priori*, but the material of interaction itself and, so, the material of social

order. Since this material is extremely diverse, the social order is too, and the robust confidence with which, for instance, Parsons (2007) spoke about the ‘American core values’ appears entirely unjustified from the viewpoint of sociolinguistic evidence – the price of analytical precision is ontological diversification (Parkin 2016).

Remember that one of the central arguments in favour of Methodological Individualism was that in human action, only *individual* subjectivity was observable. On the basis of what we have seen so far, this argument, too, has been dealt a death blow. One of sociolinguistics’ contributions to a theory of social action is *intersubjectivity*: the fact that people, when communicating, require a dialogically established normative template shared with others in order to arrive at ‘meaning’; the latter is an interpretive effect, constantly negotiated and accommodated intersubjectively (and not necessarily by means of ‘purely’ rational means). To the extent that social action is communicative action, it is *joint* action (cf. Blumer 1969; Cicourel 1973).

In the next chapter, I shall add to what has been established so far. There were things that Durkheim and his successors in the Grand Tradition of sociology could not possibly have known. They nuance some of the assumptions underlying classical sociology and they open exciting alternative trajectories of sociological re-imagination.

Notes

- 1 The assumption seems to be: since we all do it, there is no need to study it. Hence Hymes’s critical views of the communication-focused work of Bourdieu and Habermas – two exceptions to the rule just sketched here (Hymes 1996: 52–6). My own verdict on Bourdieu is significantly more merciful (Blommaert 2015a). As for Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*, (Habermas 1984), I share Hymes’s critique. Hymes points to the abstract and normative-idealized treatment of communication patterns

in the work of both, detecting a lack of sensitivity to the actual ways in which language functions in real social environments. Habermas can be said, at most, to specify a set of ideal normative *preconditions* for communication.

- 2 De Saussure, who attended lectures by Durkheim, already pointed to ‘a grammatical system that exists virtually in every brain, or more precisely in the brains of a community of individuals; because language is never complete in any individual, it exists in its perfect state only in the masses’ (1960: 30; French original, my translation). Observe here how De Saussure adopts Durkheim’s concept of ‘social fact’ and, as we shall see, deviates strongly in this from the Methodological Individualism characterizing many subsequent developments in linguistics.
- 3 I cannot enter into detail here, but the well-known Gricean Maxims (Grice 1975) assume cooperativity in communication as a given – in general, we want to understand and be understood whenever we communicate – and there is an entire tradition of ‘Accommodation Theory’ in which speech convergence between interlocutors is studied (Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991). Cooperation is also the central assumption to most of Conversation Analysis (e.g. Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977).
- 4 Knowledge practices in science are no exception, and there is a large methodological literature criticizing the claims to objectivity made in various branches of science. Aaron Cicourel’s *Method and Measurement in Sociology* (1964) famously confronted mainstream statistical research with the problems of inevitable subjectivity in interaction. His critique had a profound effect on Bourdieu’s methodology as well, and for Bourdieu, the only possible road to objectivity was the recognition of subjectivity in knowledge construction (Blommaert 2015a; for a cognate argument see Fabian 1983).
- 5 Note that ‘dialect’ in the traditional sense is a notion that has come under fire from language-ideologically inspired linguistic anthropology. Gal (2016: 117) observes that varieties defined on the basis of situation of use – ‘registers’ – are hard to distinguish from those associated with spatial identity – ‘dialects’ and ‘sociolects’; Silverstein (2016) adds to this a historical reanalysis showing how traditional dialect research can, and should, be reformulated as concerned with enregisterment. This idea was a central assumption in Agha (2007b) as well.

- 6 Without too much comment, I can observe that this view obviously clashes with the notion of the ‘ideal speaker/hearer’ that became the hallmark of Chomskyan linguistics (see section 3.1 above). What follows can be read as a straightforward empirical refutation of this notion.
- 7 Foucault (1969) coined the term ‘archive’ to identify the limits of what can be conventionally thought and understandably communicated: if we communicate within the archive, we are ‘normal’ and others will understand us; if we communicate outside the boundaries of the archive, chances are that others will qualify us as lunatics. See Blommaert (2005: 99–103) for a discussion.
- 8 Many of these forms of language testing could doubtless be categorized as forms of ‘power without knowledge’, to use David Graeber’s terms, ‘where coercion and paperwork largely substituted for the need for understanding ... subjects’ (2015: 65; see also Section 4.8). The benchmarks of such testing modes are usually fictitious ‘standard’ forms of language, imagined levels of competence, and ludicrous projections of degrees of fluency onto broader sociopolitical levels of citizenship. This form of science fiction, nonetheless, has become increasingly prominent as an instrument of power and exclusion in the field of migration, almost everywhere.