Forum

Jan Blommaert*, Elina Westinen and Sirpa Leppänen

Further notes on sociolinguistic scales

Abstract: This short paper seeks to reformulate and refine the notion of sociolinguistic scales as relative scope of understandability, thus drawing the notion fully into the realm of semiotics, rather than in the rather unproductive sphere of spatiotemporal and distributional interpretation where it has been deployed. Differences in scope of understandability are differences in the presupposability of signs, and such differences are not equivalent but stratified in a polycentric environment. Scales, in that sense, point towards the non-unified and hierarchical-layered nature of the sign and of meaning making practices. Scalar effects, once established, can furthermore be carried over into different indexical orders deployed on different topics. We draw on the results of a recent study of hip-hop culture in Finland to establish these points.

Keywords: scale, indexicality, hip-hop, semiotics, sociolinguistics, diversity

DOI 10.1515/ip-2015-0005

1 Introduction: the study

In this short paper, we wish to reflect on the notion of sociolinguistic scales, initially developed in Blommaert (2007, 2010). We make these reflections on the basis of elements from Elina Westinen's doctoral research on the construction of authenticity in Finnish hip-hop (Westinen 2014). In her dissertation, Westinen investigates the complex and polycentric constructions of what it means to be "authentic" as a rapper in Finland, drawing on the work of three Finnish rap artists: Cheek, Pyhimys, and Stepa.

***Corresponding author: Jan Blommaert:** Tilburg University and Ghent University, Belgium.
E-mail: J.blommaert@tilburguniversity.edu
Elina Westinen: Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
E-mail: elina.westinen@jyu.fi
Sirpa Leppänen: Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.
E-mail: sirpa.leppanen@jyu.fi

In the study, the lyrics of the artists are examined, and this analysis shows how all of them invoke a kind of "ideological topography" of Finland. Distinctions between centers (Helsinki, for instance) and peripheries (Sodankylä, a municipality in northern Finland, for instance) appear as powerful meaning making resources in the songs, not merely indicative of spatiotemporal differences (Helsinki being a metropolis characterized by fast life versus the slow rural and isolated life in marginal Sodankylä), but also of differences in identity, style, taste (the cosmopolitan and sophisticated Helsinki-based Cheek versus the laidback rural Stepa from Sodankylä) and in describing trajectories of success (the move away from peripheries towards centers).

The analysis of the rappers' lyrics, thus, reveals a complex set of meaningful semiotic distinctions between centers and peripheries, locality and translocality, all operating within one "benchmark" scale: Finland. The analysis of the long interviews done by Westinen with the three rappers shows how, within this Finnish scalar universe, the three rappers assume very different positions, both vis-à-vis each other (they are familiar with each other's work) and vis-à-vis hip hop culture at large. The image appearing here is that of fractality and polycentricity: there appears to be an almost infinite possibility for introducing more scales-within-scales: While Helsinki is the undisputed center of Finland, it has its own peripheries, and the geographical peripheries of Finland may have their own centers.

The study, however, yielded more fundamental insights with regard to what scales can mean as elements in the theoretical toolkit of a sociolinguistics of globalization. We will sketch these in what follows; but let us first look back on some of the early formulations of scale.

2 Underdeveloped scales

The 2007 paper "Sociolinguistic scales" by Blommaert has its origins in research done in 2004–2005 with Jim Collins and Stef Slembrouck (Blommaert et al. 2005a, 2005b), and it emerged as a working paper clarifying some ideas informally discussed during joint workshops. Inspired by literature from social geography and World-Systems Analysis, it attempted to render scale useful *as a feature of meaning making* in human interaction; more precisely as *an instrument by means of which subjects bring order in their semiotizations of the social and material world*. Such semiotizations are usually labeled "context" in sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic work: whenever people communicate they draw on potentially meaningful contextual inferences, anticipating – the proleptic dimension

of all communication – that such inferences will also be available to their interlocutors.

Scale, it was sensed, might be a way of pointing towards the complex distinctions people make *within* "context", between things that are widely presupposable and things that are not, widely available meanings and others, normative meanings and others – distinctions within acts of meaning making between things that are *of a different order*, leading us to realize the non-unified nature of signs and meaning-making practices, and the risks in an age of globalization to situate "errors" and "misunderstandings" at just one level of social experience and activity.

The semiotic orientation of this notion of sociolinguistic scales is important and deserves emphasis (also because that semiotic orientation was quite often overlooked by readers of the 2007 paper). The point is to say something about *meaning making*, about distinctions *within* meaning, given the changing contextual universes of globalization. Scales are different forms of "semiotized space and time" – the ways in which space-time dimensions of social life determine meanings and vice versa, and the ways in which such processes develop in a stratified, non-unified way due to the intrinsic polycentricity of any social environment in which communication takes place (Blommaert 2010: 39–41).

The 2007 paper was a clumsy and altogether unsuccessful attempt, achieving perhaps little more than a measure of acceptance of the necessity to consider the non-unified nature of meaning making in a sociolinguistics of globalization. Several attempts towards refining the notion were undertaken (see notably the papers in Collins et al. 2009; see Kell 2013 for a critical survey).[1] Some authors tried to stick closely to spatial aspects of communication – scale as the distributional scope of discourses, for instance – while others were satisfied to see scale as a way of capturing type-token relationships in language (making every instance of meaning making, of meaningful uptake by an interlocutor, an instance of scale), or of a way of connecting single utterances – the 'micro' aspect of sociolinguistics – with norms, standards, policies and institutions, the 'macro' aspects.

All of those attempts obviously have their merits and shortcomings, yet it would be unwise to claim that any of them provided conclusive arguments demonstrating the usefulness of scale as a sociolinguistic concept with unique analytic and theoretical purchase. The original ambition behind the use of the notion, described above as aimed at providing a more precise idea of how people

1 At the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago, November 2013, two entire panels engaged with issues of scale.

semiotize features of a different order within their social and material context, remains unfulfilled. In what follows, we will offer what could perhaps count as a further, hopefully useful, step in developing the notion in that specific sense.

3 Scale as scope of understandability

The central empirical ambition of Westinen's study is to describe hip-hop in Finland as a polycentric phenomenon, in which artists orient not towards one "central" set of meaningful indexical diacritics but to multiple centers, and in which these centers are dispersed over different scales: Finnish hip-hop can best be understood as profoundly polycentric, with differently "ordered" centers of normative orientation.

Before moving on, a word or two is required on the notion of indexicality; inspiration for elaborating this notion is drawn from Silverstein (2003, 2006); Blommaert (2005) and Agha (2007). Indexicality is the dimension of meaning in which textual features "point to" (index) contextually retrievable meanings. More concretely: every utterance carries apart from "pure" (denotational) meanings a range of sociocultural meanings, derived from widespread assumptions about the meanings signaled by the features of the utterance. Thus, "substandard" utterances – a foreign accent or a dialect accent – may invoke stereotypical identity characteristics of marginality, low levels of education, the countryside versus the city, a lack of cultural and intellectual sophistication and so forth. Possibly every feature of speech can be an indexical for some range of inferable associative and stereotypical meanings, and the same feature can carry different indexical loads simultaneously (Agha 2007).

The point is, however, that such indexicals do not occur and operate at random, but display complex and dynamic forms of "order": sets of indexicals operate along each other in ways that suggest sociocultural coherence. For instance: when we have qualified someone's speech as indexical of a rural and culturally unsophisticated background – a country bumpkin talking – we do not usually expect that person to provide elaborate and highly nuanced discourses on "sophisticated" topics such as expensive French wines or the paintings of Matisse. Such forms of indexical order create broader frames of expectation with regard to meaning: we expect coherent sociocultural meanings to follow in an orderly fashion. And when we communicate, we will have to delve into the reservoir of such coherent frames, hoping that they are shared by our interlocutors and that, consequently, what we say "makes sense" to them. We thus see scales as *particular forms of indexical order*. But before that point is made, something more needs to be said on scale itself.

As we know, the notion of scale is originally closely tied to space and time, and in the literature, scale is often seen as spatiotemporal scope; hence the current usage of distinctions such as "local" and "global" when discussing scales. In taking scale into sociolinguistic theorizing, however, Blommaert (2010: 34) defined it as "semiotized space and time". How this semiotization actually has to be imagined, we have seen, remains largely underdeveloped. Which is where we need to turn to Westinen's illuminating study.

As a first step towards an empirical clarification of the semiotized nature of space and time, and in line with the initial semiotic orientation of the notion, let us propose that sociolinguistic scales can best be understood in terms of *the spatiotemporal scope of understandability*; we are thus looking at the *degrees* to which particular signs can be expected to be understandable, and "semiotized space-time" stands for the way in which space and time define the relative scope of meaningful semiotic activity in relation to other scales.

Thus, in Western Europe more people would be able to draw on a set of inferences about places such as London and Paris (even if they have never visited these places) than, say, on places such as Bielefeld in Germany or Gijon in Spain. Speaking about Bielefeld and Gijon, consequently, will require more and more detailed and explicit information than speaking about Paris and London, since we can expect more people to have readily available (stereotypical) associations about Paris and London than about Bielefeld and Gijon. Paris and London are *more presupposable* as signs than Bielefeld and Gijon. Paris and London, consequently, semiotically operate on a higher scale than Bielefeld and Gijon – they have a larger scope of understandability. Similar scale effects can be expected whenever we mention Christ – a sign presupposable to all Christians regardless of denomination – than about, say, Saint Ambrose or the Dominican Order – signs belonging to the Catholic tradition *within* Christianity. And we can also expect more people to have inferences about Shakespeare than, say, about the Finnish author Sofi Oksanen.

The spatiotemporal scope of understandability – our understanding of sociolinguistic scales – is a crucial instrument in a sociolinguistics of globalization, because the globalized flows of semiotic material can be expected to create new scales and more complex forms of multiscalarity. Much of Westinen's study documents such complexities: we can see how three rap artists develop scalar frames in their work, and how such scalar frames can then be *redeployed* in discourses about themselves and other artists, about the quality of what they and others do, and about what it means to be an "authentic" rapper in Finland. Or more precisely: how the delicate projections of and connections between scalar frames make up the core of what they understand by "authenticity", and how these scalar projections and understandings of authenticity are *different* in each case, revealing a fundamentally polycentric Finnish hip-hop culture.

4 Two different scalar effects

This latter point emerged out of reflections on what initially looked like a problem of inconsistency in the study. Like most other researchers on hip-hop (and popular music cultures more generally), Westinen had originally intended to focus her analysis on the lyrics written by the artists. Fieldwork interviews were, in this design, conceived as *secondary* data, useful for examining what the artists "really meant" in their lyrics.

While following this design, however, we started noticing something. The construction of scalar frames is overt and evident in the lyrics of the artists. The rappers all weave intricate references to what we call an "ideological topography" of Finland into their songs: references to the geographical, but also social and cultural margins and centers of Finland, stereotypical distinctions between places, people, characteristics and activities within a Finnish horizon. Finland is a scale level within which the three rappers construct a clear, overt and (within Finland) widely presupposable set of indexical and hierarchical distinctions that "make sense" to themselves and to their audiences, and that project their own chosen formats of authenticity. They very much speak from within Finland.

When looking at the long interviews with the rappers, however, something different emerged. The rappers *absorb* the indexical distinctions deployed in their lyrics and largely driven by an ideological topography of Finland; and they use these distinctions *as indexical resources for addressing a variety of other topics*. More precisely: on the basis of delicate ideological-topographical distinctions, the rappers build a set of scalar frames in their lyrics that create different degrees of locality and translocality as part of their "authentic" rap songs; their authenticity is projected by the indexical ordering of these specific semiotic materials. Once these scalar frames are in place, however, they can *in turn* become the semiotic materials by means of which *different* discursive distinctions can emerge: distinctions of artistic quality, of character, of relative position within the Finnish hip-hop scene and the global hip-hop scene at large.

The patterns we encountered in the interviews remind us of an older paper by Michael Silverstein (1985), in which he examines a conversation between two students newly enrolled at the University of Chicago. While Silverstein's paper focuses on theoretical and methodological issues of ethnopoetic analysis, the material he presents closely resembles the materials in Westinen's study: the two students elaborately refer to places such as "Iowa", "Loyola University" or "Georgetown", and Silverstein shows how the dense ideological-topographical indexical loads of these places create a system of indexical attribution (a frame, in the Goffmanian sense) in talking about entirely different issues. While the talk is not *about* these places, the indexical order *invoked by* these places contributes

to the construction of meanings on other subjects. And these second-level meanings are again scalar: the degree of presupposability of, for instance, Georgetown University as a place where academic quality is taken for granted is higher than that of, for instance, the University of Iowa. Mentioning "Georgetown University" can consequently become more presupposable as an argument for being well prepared for the standards of the University of Chicago than mentioning "University of Iowa"; and it would also pass easier as a suggestion of being a bright student or a scion of a wealthy family.

The almost accidental byproduct of the work reported in Westinen's study is thus that we can see *how already ordered indexicals can themselves become elements of another order*; how presupposable meanings can in turn contribute to the presupposability of other meanings; how semiotic output (a finished meaning product) can become input (raw meaning material) in other semiotic processes; how semiotic effects can become conditions for other effects. Rather than an either-or script of analysis in which scalarity is located either in the lyrics or in the interviews, or of a cumulative one in which scalar effects occur in both, we get a *sequential* and *hierarchical* outcome, in which one type of sociocultural activity – the production of rap lyrics – generates a register of scalar semiotic resources which proves to produce *another level* of scalarity in another type of sociocultural activity: meta-commentary by the rappers on their work, status, and identity.

Scalar distinctions, we can see, become elements of other evaluative distinctions, now infused by the power of the earlier scalar effects. Cheek, for instance, can invoke his cosmopolitan Helsinki basis as an argument to demonstrate his vastly superior musical and technical erudition over Stepa, whose roots are in the far northern Sodankylä; but Cheek – who moved into Helsinki from outside the metropolitan area – can in turn be qualified as "not really from Helsinki" by Pyhimys, who is born and bred there and whose activities in the musical field extend far beyond hip hop. "Being from Helsinki", therefore, allows the indexicals of "Helsinkiness" to be played out in a wide variety of ways and from a range of speaker positions – the translocally presupposable nature of these indexicals makes such forms of deployment possible, it makes them iterative and productive. Similar claims made on grounds of "Sodankyläness", in contrast, cannot be made without elaborate and explicit motivation. The scope of understandability of the former is far larger than that of the latter.

We begin to see how scalar distinctions can explain degrees of productivity or iterativity of semiotic resources. More widely accessible semiotic resources, the ones that carry the most widely presupposable indexical orders, will be vastly more productive and iterative than less widely presupposable ones. This takes scale way beyond type-token relationships – every meaning effect involves a

type-token projection, so we risk a tautology if we see every type-token projection as an instance of scale. Instead, the focus here is on the dynamic emergence and continuous recalibration of *qualitative distinctions* between meaning effects. And it also takes scales out of the rather unproductive complex of spatial metaphorizations: we're looking at *scale as a qualitative feature of meaning making*.

In a context of globalization, where the scope of understandability becomes a pressing concern – and an urgent problem – for large numbers of people and the meanings they attempt to make moving through the sociolinguistic regimes of different places on earth, this semiotic focus is mandatory. The fact of mobility itself is not to be overlooked; but it must be well understood that sociolinguistically, such translocal mobility is a *condition* generating localized *effects* that are themselves still insufficiently understood.

5 Scale and complexity

We can extend a methodological caution at this point. Westinen could never have found the layered, dynamic and hierarchical structure of scalarity if she would have restricted her investigation to just one set of data and one method of analysis – the careful discourse analysis of rap lyrics, for instance. It was when we realized that the interview data – originally anticipated to be simply secondary data scaffolding and thickening the analysis of the lyrics – offered a very different range of issues and displayed very different scalar phenomena, related to but also relatively autonomous from the ones detected in the lyrics, that we began to see the complexity of the meaning potential generated by scalar frames.

We could not have detected on the basis of the lyrics alone the ways in which differences in the scope of understandability of specific discursive features contribute to the construction and projection of identities, of evaluative judgments of others' character and work and of relative positionings of rappers within a particular horizon of popular culture. Conversely, if the analysis would have been based on the interviews alone, the ideological-topographical frames would probably be seen as "primary" indexical materials rather than the second-order materials they now proved to be, and we would have failed to spot the very significant differences in the indexical ordering that went on in both activities. Scales could easily be identified as "content organizers" of rap lyrics. These lyrical content organizers, however, quickly showed tendencies to become "contents" to be "organized" again, and in a different way, in the interviews. It was, thus, the plurality of data sets and approaches to them that enabled scalarity itself to emerge as a complex and dynamic system that defies simple and static images of "local versus global" or "type versus token".

References

Agha, Asif. 2007. *Language and social relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Blommaert, Jan. 2005. *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Blommaert, Jan. 2007. Sociolinguistic scales. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 4(1), 1–19.
Blommaert, Jsan. 2010. *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Blommaert, Jan, James Collins, and Stef Slembrouck. 2005a. Spaces of multilingualism. *Language & Communication* 25(3), 197–216.
Blommaert, Jan, James Collins, and Stef Slembrouck. 2005b. Polycentricity and interactional regimes in 'global neighborhoods'. *Ethnography* 69(3), 205–235.
Collins, James, Stef Slembrouck, and Mike Baynham (eds.). 2009. *Globalisation and language in contact: Scale, migration, and communicative practices*. London: Continuum.
Kell, Catherine. 2013. Ariadne's thread: Literacy, scale and meaning making across space and time. *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies,* Paper 118.
Silverstein, Michael. 1985. On the pragmatic poetry of prose: parallelism, repetition and cohesive structure in the time course of dyadic conversation. In Deborah Schiffrin (ed.) *Meaning, form and use in context: Linguistic applications*, 181–199. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
Silverstein, Michael. 2003. Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication* 23, 193–229.
Silverstein, Michael. 2006. Pragmatic indexing. In Keith Brown (ed.) *Encycopaedia of Language and Linguistics 2nd edition, Volume 6*, 14–17. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
Westinen, Elina. 2014. *The discursive construction of authenticity: Resources, scales and polycentricity in Finnish hip hop culture*. University of Jyväskylä (PhD dissertation). http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-5728-5

Bionotes

Jan Blommaert is Professor of Language, Culture and Globalization at Tilburg University, The Netherlands, and Professor of African Linguistics and Sociolinguistics at Ghent University, Belgium. J.blommaert@tilburguniversity.edu

Elina Westinen is Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Elina.westinen@jyu.fi

Sirpa Leppänen is Professor of English at the Department of Languages, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. sirpa.leppanen@jyu.fi