

2019-01-01

Book Review: Durkheim and the Internet

Andrew Jocuns

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa>



Part of the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jocuns, Andrew (2019) "Book Review: Durkheim and the Internet," *PASAA*: Vol. 57, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digital.car.chula.ac.th/pasaa/vol57/iss1/9>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Chulalongkorn Journal Online (CUJO) at Chula Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in PASAA by an authorized editor of Chula Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ChulaDC@car.chula.ac.th.

BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Jocuns

Department of English & Linguistics
Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University
Patum Thani 12120 Thailand
Email: jocunsa@gmail.com

Durkheim and the Internet

Subtitle: On Sociolinguistics and the Sociological Imagination

Author: Jan Blommaert

Publisher: Bloomsbury

Year of Publication: 2018

Pages: 136 pp.

ISBN: 9781350055186

Introduction

Jan Blommaert's *Durkheim and the Internet: On sociolinguistics and the sociological imagination* is a timely reflection on relating one of the great thinkers in sociology to the field of sociolinguistics. One of Blommaert's points throughout this work is how sociolinguistics has done a great job at focusing upon the linguistic aspects of the field, but has often not paid attention to, or not made a stronger contribution to, the field of sociology. This book is a strong theoretical account in which Blommaert introduces some of the main concepts of Emille Durkheim and how those can be applied to sociolinguistics. In addition, Blommaert introduces us to some theories based on this work in relation to on-line/off-line worlds Sociolinguistically.

Sociolinguists of English as well as English teachers who have an interest in researching language on-line may find this work particularly useful. In what follows I offer a summary of the five chapters that make up this book and then offer a case study of a popular Thai video Bloggers *Loukgolf's English Room* analyzing it based on Blommaert's theory and relating it to the field of Global English.

Summary

Chapter 1 Sociolinguists as sociologists, Blommaert draws our attention to Durkheim's social fact. As Blommaert notes, the social fact was Durkheim's attempt to create a science of the social. However, many of Durkheim's fellow sociologists at the time were not too happy with this concept. Rather they developed an alternative approach which became known as rational choice theory and methodological individualism. The social fact transcends the individual (i.e. it operates within the level of some group, speech community, community of practice) and produces structures and/or norms for use. For this reason, Blommaert argues, the social fact is something which is under the surface of what a sociologically derived sociolinguistics can be.

Chapter 2 discusses in more detail Durkheim's social fact and the historical roots of its origins in French society. For Durkheim's sociology norms were an important feature, but they were not just unwritten rules for behavior, rather they reflected the moral social order of everyday life among human beings. The social fact referred to norms, values, and social structures which reflected the moral order. Blommaert notes that these are not just collective rules for society, rather they are collective to the degree that we agree upon them in a type of social contract. One point of departure, if not confusion, from Durkheim's writing had to do with his reference to social groups which were ill-defined as far as how much analytical attention he paid to them. The chapter then

provides a discussion of two of Durkheim's concepts, integration and anomie.

Integration refers to how it is that members of a society are bound together through beliefs, values, norms and social processes which together make up a collective consciousness. Such integration comes into question when societies go through periodic change. Sometimes the change that emerges results in a state of seeming chaos, which is where Durkheim's notion of anomie comes in to focus. Anomie is a concept of central importance to understanding Durkheim, and it refers to contexts in which norms are rejected, either because individuals reject them outright or they cannot be accessed. Anomie is a state of normlessness. This concept was used to illustrate facts regarding social change. Remember Durkheim was a contemporary of late 19th century France which had gone through decades of order and disorder. Anomie describes how in a state of normlessness new forms of norms emerge. This is where the internet comes in to play in Blommaert's analysis. The internet, social media, apps, on-line gaming are all contexts in which anomie existed in their early use. Yet over time social facts and the norms which support them have emerged. In other words what initially may look like anomie, in fact develops into social cohesion in quick order. One connection to the study of Global English is that for many people engaging in on-line environments English is often the primary means of communication where it is used as lingua franca. English has also emerged on the internet in language games, for example on Youtube there are a variety of vlog (video blogs) contributions that take on the character of a language game. These include: accent challenges where English may emerge as an ELF, overdubbing scenes from movies in varieties of Global English, and the ubiquitous English language teaching forums including such popular vlogs as *Louk Golf's English room*. Anomie played a role in how these new contexts for English emerged because of how media and modalities on the internet required new social norms for behavior.

In Chapter 3 Sociolinguistics and the social fact, Blommaert begins to make connections between Durkheim's typology and sociolinguistics. The social fact of language was initially the rules for language, or grammar, which became the science of linguistics. Such grammars evolved into what has often been a problematic notion in linguistics: where and how do we draw distinct boundaries between languages? For linguistics proper, language itself was the social fact which included the quest for linguistic universals and the dominance of the theories which make up the Chomskyan paradigm. Blommaert notes that the development of modern sociolinguistics from Sapir and Whorf, to Hymes and Gumperz, to Silverstein and Blommaert himself, was a reaction to the notion that language itself was the social fact. A lot of sociolinguistic research indicated how norms for: language use, language ideologies, and ways of speaking were the social fact(s) that sociolinguists developed as objects of inquiry. Blommaert emphasizes Silverstein's (2003) notion of *orders of indexicality* as one of the ways in which Durkheim's social fact is actualized as a sociologically based sociolinguistics. Indexical order refers to how it is that ways of speaking become social facts via the ideological value that different speakers place upon them (both Clark (2013) and Johnstone (2013) provide thorough examples of orders of indexicality at work in English varieties).

Indexical order coupled with the fact that in places where anomie seemingly exists (e.g. new social media apps) users cannot resist the temptation to apply their own series of rules to new media. Blommaert then notes how studies of linguistic variation have begun to be able to unsurface the ideologies behind variation noting also the rise of the study of global Englishes. People growing up in certain parts of the world put their own localized nuances, or social facts, upon English (e.g. localized Thai English). The latter has given rise to the recent discussion of languaging, where in multilingual environments the mixing and blending of multilingual resources culminate in localized hybridized ways of speaking, known as translanguaging (Wei, 2018). Thai English

certainly fits the notions of both social fact and orders of indexicality. Some argue whether or not Thai English is variety despite the fact that they may have some of its features in their respective idiolects (Jocuns, 2018).

Those familiar with Blommaert's work would recall how he privileges the notion of voice as the unit of analysis in sociolinguistics and discourse (Blommaert, 2005). The notion of voice is then related to the social fact, where voice refers to how it is that speakers make themselves heard and understood, a notion which has been the object of inquiry of linguistic anthropology (e.g. ethnography of communication) since Hymes. Blommaert introduces some important works from the anthropology and sociology of globalization. Notably, Appadurai (1996) who coined the term *vernacular globalization* to refer to how globalization has been localized, such that top-down globalization strategies are affected by local dimensions, or what has been referred to as glocalizations (Robertson, 1995). Blommaert also discusses Castells' study of the effect of modernization and technology that has culminated in the network society (Castells, 2009). Blommaert draws our attention to three keywords which influence the theory that he begins to outline: *polycentricity*, *mobility* and *complexity*. *Polycentricity* refers to the fact that there may be multiple sets of social norms operating at the same time and that such norms are scaled and stratified. *Mobility* refers to how it is that social life is no longer sedentary but is embedded in different scales and chronotopes. Chronotopes are derived from Bakhtin (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981) are regularized behavior that is structured in time. *Complexity* refers to the fact that social life is effectively in flux and dynamic, its rules are constantly changing. Complexity is likely derived from dynamic systems theory sometimes referred to as chaos theory. Social norms are, "ordered sets of interactionally ratified behavioral details" (p. 47). Whenever we act in the world, we are acting *polynominally* – we interact amongst a variety of social norms that are scaled in terms of local, national, international, and globalized indexical orders. *Microhegemonies* is

the term that Blommaert introduces to describe such sets of highly specific social norms in relation to identity.

A discussion of iterative/creative follows where iterative behavior is behavior that has a set template for it, where as creative is the idea that there can be derivations from such templates. Three points are then related to this: first, that behaviors never occur in isolation that they often occur within what we can refer to as a nexus of practice (Jocuns, 2018b, 2018a; Scollon & Scollon, 2004); second, that such behaviors are layered in complex dynamic relationships some of which are scaled; and third, that both points have an effect upon the goal-oriented nature of social action. Here the idea that a share or a like on a social media app is not just a “share” or a “like” but a social action related to identity amidst a complex array of other such behaviors.

Blommaert then discusses a theory of identity using the term *microhegemony* discussed earlier, arguing that identities are bound up in a series of microhegemonies, “chronotopically organized moralized behavioral scripts” (p.57). The chronotopic nature of identities as microhegemonies refers to the fact that when we perform identity work, the work that we are performing is specific to a particular time-space context. What works in one chronotopic environment can fail in another. Education and teaching can provide a good example for this. Consider a small seminar class with five or six graduate students, now think of trying to use that same teaching method in a classroom of forty students. Such teaching methods are chronotopes and what works in teaching graduate students in a small seminar in the United States, may not work as a chronotope in Thailand, and/or with a group of more than a dozen students. Chronotopes can overlap and Blommaert provides a discussion of the work of Goffman (1999) noting how the front stage/back stage divide involves two overlapping chronotopes. This leads to a discussion of some research and findings from on-line communication, for example the importance of multimodal literacy and the porous

nature of on-line and off-line social groups where behaviors and actions can move off-line from an on-line world (e.g. the use of hashtags in the offline world to direct our attention on-line for example at weddings).

Social groups were an important feature of Durkheim's sociology and here Blommaert offers a discussion of differences between *light* and *thick* social groups. *Light* groups are those that have loose social ties which can also be described as fleeting and ephemeral because we are constantly moving in and out of them. We may know the rules for interacting in such groups but know little beyond that. *Thick* groups are those which have much stronger ties and lasting interactions. The nature of communication on-line has tended to follow that of light groups, we often know little about the people we interact with on a sports fan message board. But we know how to interact with them on the message board less we be dubbed a "noob" (a person inexperienced in an activity on the internet). At the same time many of the people on the message board we only know from their posts there, we know their username not their first name, and we may not know what they do beyond that board. Yet these light groups are intimately attached to thicker ones, the sports club that we follow. Blommaert discusses how a study of light groups in the on-line world needs to pay attention to thick groups that may exist off-line. Blommaert closes out the chapter with a more nuanced discussion of polycentricity revealing how individuals are engaged on different levels of interaction on and off line, and lastly introducing the notion of constructure. Structure has often been perceived as anathema in social science, especially within the critical paradigm in linguistics. Blommaert notes that researchers like Bourdieu rejected a certain type of structure (i.e. structuralism a la Levi-Strauss) but did not reject the structural nature of social systems. Constructure refers to the notion that social structures themselves are dynamic and constantly changing and sociolinguistics should account for that structure in society not just linguistic structure.

Chapter 5, The sociological reimagination is a short 4 pages that summarizes the findings and development of the theory that Blommaert presented within the book. Blommaert emphasizes that the theories that he has developed have been an attempt to counteract and contradict individualistic views of human nature that emphasize “unrestricted agency” (p. 94). The culmination of these different theories, Blommaert argues, is a newly “animated re-imagination of the social world” (p. 93) within the context of larger patterns of globalization (Appadurai 1996). To that end Blommaert’s work in this book is a reimagining of the social imagination that Durkheim had initially established, but now within the context of the current state of globalization. In addition this book establishes a how sociolinguistics should handle globalization such that the concepts and theories which have been used to define the field of sociolinguistics need re-evaluating in the era of globalization and the internet.

Relations to English as Global Language

Even though this is a short book at 136 pages (96 pages of which are chapter text), there is a lot going on in this work. It is quite dense in its theoretical approach but Blommaert does a good job of grounding such theoretical notions with specific examples. One of the big takeaways from this work is its relation to Global English as a field of study. While Blommaert’s title refers to the internet in general, the content focuses upon much more than that. The theme of the book is more so using sociolinguistics and sociology as sociolinguists in the on-line/off-line continuum. The relation here to global English is that English is everywhere, and one of the spaces in which it is everywhere is the internet. For me the work presented here has immediate use with my linguistics students at Thammasat who often go on-line for many of their learning efforts regarding the languages that they are interested in learning. There are several well-established video bloggers on the Thai netscape who have largely a Thai audience, and whose primary focus is on English. One that comes to mind is the vlog

Loukgolf's English Room. In what follows I briefly use some of Blommaert's theory to talk about Thai English as a global variety.

Recall from the discussion of chapter 4 that Blommaert set about developing several theories all of which are related. I will focus on two of them of including: an indexical polynomic theory of social norms and a microhegemonic theory of social of identity to make some quick observations about how they are related to the glocalized variety of Thai English.

The notion of indexical order earlier is interesting to consider in terms of Thai English. Indexical order refers to how it is that we can derive different orders of indexical meaning often attributed to varieties of English but also other languages and ways of speaking. If we take Thai English as a case in point we can easily note these differences in indexicality. Silverstein noted three orders of indexicality. A first order indexicality is evidence for the potential of indexical relations between ways of speaking and sociolinguistic variation where indexical links with social groups are not yet established. Rather they are identifiable by sociolinguists. A first order of indexicality in Thai English would be the identification of a sociolinguistic variable(s) including the use of politeness and discourse markers (e.g. na, ka, khrap, ja, la) or even more specific the application of cluster reduction rules in Thai on to English. A second order indexicality is where we can begin to identify such variables with social groups. In the case of Thai English such variables as cluster reduction or the use of politeness markers by Thai people in spoken English may be identified with a social group, e.g. people who are not "educated." Lastly a third order of indexicality is where that feature can be performed. This I argue is how we can apply the notions of an indexical polynomic theory of social identity and microhegemony from Blommaert's book to vloggers in the Thai netscape. The fact that the Thai accent of English can be mimicked on-line illustrates that this variety works in terms of both polynomic social identity and microhegemony.

Evaluation

While I found this work a fascinating read that dives deeply into theory, one of the issues that I have revolves around the question as to why we need new terminology to talk about such notions as identity? The question also arises as to whether or not adding such new terminology makes the analysis of English, specifically Thai English as a variety, more complex than it needs to be? Presently we are in an era of sociolinguistics research which has seen the emergence of new terminology to describe concepts which some may argue we already have terms for. Yet these new terms such as translanguaging, metrolingualism, and even superdiversity (Pennycook, 2016) have proven to be useful in describing the current context of sociolinguistics the world over. The present state of globalization has thus forced academics to rethink how concepts such as codeswitching, bilingualism or multilingualism emerge differently in the present state of the world. As such new terminology to describe terms such as identity, e.g. Blommaert's microhegemony, are more so a reconceptualizing of the term identity in the present of the world, not reinventing the wheel. For me I find Blommaert's approach to theory quite refreshing and if taken in relation to some of Blommaert's other work (Blommaert, 2010, 2013, 2018), we can see how these new theories are an attempt to emphasize the complexity of sociolinguistic life within the context of globalization and glocalization. The audience for this work are sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists, but to that I would add English teachers as well, who should be interested in understanding the complex array of on-line and off-line behavior in studying global English.

The Book Reviewer

Andrew Jocuns holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from Georgetown University, USA. His areas of interest include Discourse analysis, multimodal Discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, linguistic landscapes and World Englishes. He is currently working as a Linguistics lecturer at Thammasat University, Thailand.

References

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M., & Holquist, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2010). *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, J. (2013). *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes: Chronicles of Complexity*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Blommaert, J. (2018). *Dialogues with ethnography: notes on classics, and how I read them*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Castells, M. (2009). *The Rise of the Network Society, With a New Preface: the Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume I*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Clark, U. (2013). *Language and Identity in Englishes*. London ; New York : Routledge.
- Goffman, E. (1999). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books/Doubleday.
- Jocuns, A. (2018a). English in Thai Tourism: Global English as a Nexus of Practice. In S. R. Mehta (Ed.), *Language and Literature in a Glocal World* (pp. 57–76). Singapore: Springer.

- Jocuns, A. (2018b). Examining traditional communicative practices in Gerai, Indonesia: a nexus analysis. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 13(1), 37–51.
- Johnstone, B. (2013). *Speaking Pittsburghese: the story of a dialect*. Oxford: OUP.
- Pennycook, A. (2016). Mobile times, mobile terms: The trans-super-poly-metro movement. In N. Coupland (Ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical Debates* (pp. 201–216). Cambridge University Press.
- <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107449787.010>
- Robertson, R. (1995). Glocalization: Time-space and homogeneity-heterogeneity. *Global Modernities*, 25, 44.
- Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. B. K. (2004). *Nexus analysis discourse and the emerging Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication*, 23, 193–229.

Information for Contributors

PASAA is an international, peer-reviewed journal of the Chulalongkorn University Language Institute (CULI). It is the oldest professional English language teaching journal in Thailand. The journal is currently indexed in SCOPUS, ERIC, ACI and TCI (Tier 1). It has an open-access online version (ISSN 2287-0024) as a companion to the print edition (ISSN 0125-2488).

PASAA publishes two volumes annually and aims at publishing articles on a wide range of topics relevant to current ELT enquiry. This includes second and foreign language learning and teaching, materials development, curriculum design and development, language testing and assessment, language program evaluation, identities in second and foreign language learning and teaching, critical pedagogy, and teacher training and professional development.

PASAA welcomes submissions in four categories: research articles, academic articles, discussion/idea-sharing articles, and book reviews.

Submission Categories

Research articles must be based on recent empirical research contributing to bridging theory and practice in the ELT profession. PASAA publishes both qualitative and quantitative research findings. Eligible manuscripts should not exceed 8,500 words, including references and appendices. An abstract of no longer than 200 words is also required for each manuscript.

Academic articles present a comprehensive review of current ELT scholarship and interest. Manuscripts based upon interpreted references to others' works should provide a critical discussion of implications or applications for theory and practice. Manuscripts with references should not be longer than 5,500 words with an abstract of about 200 words.

Discussion / idea-sharing articles provide an opportunity for ELT professionals to share their hands-on experience in teaching or conducting research. Manuscripts may focus on classroom

teaching activities, online teaching and learning, materials design and development, extra-curricular activities, action research, or research tips. Manuscripts should be in the range of 1,500-3,500 words. An abstract of about 200 words is required.

Book reviews must be based upon recent books in the fields of English language teaching and learning. Manuscripts should not exceed 1,300 words.

Submission Requirements

Please adhere to the following guidelines when submitting your manuscript.

1. Manuscripts must be typewritten in MS Document format, 12-point Times New Roman font with 1.5 spacing.
2. Manuscripts must conform to the stylistic guidelines prescribed by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), 6th Edition (2010).
3. A bio-data of 50 words, an email address, and an affiliation must accompany each submission.
4. Specify in an accompanying email which category your submission is for.
5. Manuscripts must be carefully edited for language quality before submission.
6. The author is responsible for ensuring that the manuscript has been thoroughly edited and proofread to reach an academically appropriate standard of English. Manuscripts that do not conform to this requirement will be returned to the author for revision before the peer review process is undertaken.
7. Manuscripts must be submitted to the Editor by e-mail at: pasaa.editor2018@gmail.com

Remarks

- Manuscripts must not have been previously published nor under consideration for publishing by other journals.
- Submissions that do not follow the above requirements will not be considered.

Review policy

Manuscripts will be firstly screened by the editorial team. If a manuscript is of insufficient quality or lies outside the scope of the journal, it may be rejected at this stage. However, if approved, it will be passed on to reviewers and the double-blind review process will be used. The editorial team reserves the right to accept or reject articles.

Further inquiries should be sent to:

Asst. Prof. Kandaporn Jaroenkitboworn, Ph.D.

Editor of PASAA

Research Department

Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

Prem Purachattra Building

Phayathai Road, Bangkok 10330 Thailand

Tel: +66-2-218-6051

Fax: +66-2-218-6104

E-mail: pasaa.editor2018@gmail.com

<http://www.culi.chula.ac.th/publicationsonline/>