Editorial

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Investigating sociolinguistic differentiation through reflexive practices: metapragmatics, regimentation and empowerment

1 Introduction

While the study of social difference and linguistic diversity has always been central to the grand *problematique* of sociolinguistics (Eckert 2019), recent sociolinguistic developments have attempted to finetune the field's epistemological and methodological toolkits in order to adequately account for the changing landscapes surrounding language and society (Pennycook 2017; Piller 2016; Wortham and Reyes 2015). Alongside these developments, contemporary research in sociolinguistics has started scrutinizing the very notion of "difference," resulting in a shift from construing difference not as a static, pre-given, and uncontestable feature of sociolinguistic analysis but as a concept that is subject to semiotic constructions and agentive negotiations throughout social life (Gal and Irvine 2019). Such a turn makes it imperative to examine how processes of differentiation unfold through reflexive practices and how, along the way, signs are "indexically 'made to fit' a particular (set of) context(s)" (Blommaert 2005: 43).

This special issue contributes to this body of work by revisiting and (re)problematizing the role of reflexivity in sociolinguistic research about differentiation. It examines people's *in situ* attempts to propose, challenge, affirm, or reconfigure indexicalities and social relations. Specifically, this special issue (a) highlights the role of reflexive practices in the development, perpetuation, or contestation of specific instances of language ideologies; (b) sheds light on the very embedding of sociolinguistic differentiation and identity construction in multi-faceted situations; and (c) represents lived experiences in sociolinguistic scholarship without forgetting

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to incorporate the researcher's own positionality and participation in the circulation of these ideologies and sociolinguistic processes. The remainder of this introductory article presents the theoretical framing and positioning that tie this special issue to the ongoing academic conversation about the relationship between reflexivity and differentiation.

All the contributions to the special issue direct their attention to metapragmatic discourse, that is, discourse describing language use and accounting, more or less explicitly, for the pragmatics of a (set of) sign(s) or communicative practice(s) (Agha 2007; Silverstein 1993). In metapragmatic discourse, reflexivity meets a metapragmatic function (Bublitz and Hübler 2007; Silverstein 1993; Verschueren 2000): it allows those taking part in the process of communication to plan, evaluate or control the contextual appropriateness of what they or the others are doing and how they are doing it. Consequently, attending to metapragmatic discourse enables researchers to investigate not only how reflexivity regiments language use by reproducing and strengthening existing forms of differentiation but also how it can empower language users by enabling them to reconfigure or tackle regimenting indexicalities. Collectively, the contributions argue that metapragmatic discourse is at the core of the construction and negotiation of difference, and seek to answer the following questions. First, what roles do reflexive practices play in the metapragmatic reconfiguration of social relations? Second, how can a focus on reflexive practices unpack processes of sociolinguistic differentiation? Third, how do people (un)do regimentation as they partake in on-site processes of sociolinguistic differentiation? Finally, how does the study of on-site processes reveal larger structures of sociolinguistic tensions and inequalities?

2 On-site processes of sociolinguistic differentiation

The analysis of metapragmatic discourse provides sociolinguistics with a vantage point to approach contemporary social life – one which has mobility, in its social and semiotic sense, at its core (Blommaert 2010) – while doing justice to the language ideologies and practices of the very people that such research aims to represent. It shed lights on how people partake in processes of *sociolinguistic differentiation* (Gal 2016), the making of differences and similarities between signs, situations, and social positions in actual interactions. As Gal and Irvine (2019: 1) state:

> Statements about language are never merely statements. They entail ideological positions that are made evident in multiple sites of social life, often in contradictory and contested ways, and they have wide-ranging consequences in the material world. The communicative signs people

use are engaged in social projects motivating and sometimes transforming their activities – not only commenting upon them. […] conceptions of language and linguistic practices – indeed of communication more broadly – depend on *differentiations*: the differentiations among signs, among people's social positions and historical moments, and among the projects people undertake.

Statements about language are not produced in a social void. They necessarily emerge in specific situations, even if they undergo an entextualization process (decontextualization and recontextualization) that lifts them from their originating contexts (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Park and Bucholtz 2009; Silverstein and Urban 1996). As such, the study of on-site processes of differentiation is a means to take into account that "language-ideologically loaded semiotic features (indexicals) come in as a translocal but locally enacted layer of historical meaning" (Blommaert 2015b: 107). Following this lead, the issue explores how the study of metapragmatic discourse and the on-site fabric of language ideologies could outline new ways of understanding the entanglement of language and society. In other words, it sub-scribes to Agha's (2007: 9) view that "we can only study the intelligibility of social relations for social actors by making reflexive processes a central focus of the study." To do this, all contributions employ various metapragmatic concepts to make sense of the assumptions, manifestations, reconfigurations, and implications of sociolinguistic differentiation. An overarching similarity between the contribu-tions is the use of Silverstein's view of signs as a starting point (1993: 42; emphasis, quotation marks, and parentheses in original) – that "an indexical sign points from the ever-moving here-and-now occurrence of some signal (token) to its *presupposed* '*context*' and/or to its *entailed* '*consequences*' (though of course the latter are semi-otically 'in' context as well as the former)".

As we revisit this view, we utilize various metapragmatic concepts in our analysis – such as indexicality (Silverstein 1993, 2003), emblems and enregisterment (Agha 2007) – in relation to critical sociolinguistic frameworks such as interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis embedded in an ethnographic epistemology (Heller et al. 2017; Rampton et al. 2015). Such a decision to locate metapragmatic queries in ethnographic undertakings is driven by our view of the situatedness of linguistic practices and language ideologies as falling under different yet interconnected sociolinguistic realities. It appears to be the best way to account for the circulations of signs. As Johnstone and Kiesling (2008: 29) claim:

It is people's lived experiences that create indexicality. Since every speaker has a different history of experience with pairings of context and form, speakers may have many different senses of the potential indexical meanings of particular forms. Indexical relations are forged in individuals' phenomenal experience of their particular sociolinguistic worlds.

A focus on metapragmatic discourse is a means to take into account layers of social realities as these are inhabited by individuals. More precisely, by combining meta-pragmatic concepts with ethnographically informed approaches, the contributions to this special issue aspire to lift the veil on the very embedding of metapragmatic discourse in the social and material world—an embedding that enables or prevents sociolinguistic differentiation. While the processes and practices under study occur at and/or across different scales (e.g. individual, professional, national identities) or in different contexts (e.g. corporations, networking events, interviews), they all reflect ways of viewing language and society that respond to contemporary socio-linguistic changes and forms of de/reconstruction of established notions such as communities, class, ethnicities, emotions, language and communication.

3 (Un)Doing regimentation in reflexive practices

The metapragmatic study of on-site processes of differentiation calls for a shift in how researchers approach reflexivity, which has often been defined as a universal of human communication (Bateson 1972; Jakobson 1960; Urban 2001). Zienkowski (2017: 4), for instance, defines it as "the human ability to act interpretively upon the (potentially) interpretive behavior of others […] grounded upon an internalization of the other's viewpoint into one's own sense of self in the twin process of interaction and interpretation". As a design feature of language, reflexivity accounts for the ways language refers to itself. Reflexive language offers a formal apparatus that enables people to describe and comment on their communicative resources and practices (Authier-Revuz 1995; Lucy 1993), and manage the on-going interaction (Bublitz and Hübler 2007). Reflexivity – sometimes confined to a specific apparatus or a limited set of discourse strategies – encompasses all the resources that allow individuals to reflect on what is going on while communicating (Agha 2007).

　　Beyond an ideational view that focuses on reflexivity as a means and a product of human cognition, this special issue considers the situated and embodied prac-tices that enable individuals or groups to reflect on who they are being and what they are doing and experiencing while communicating. In real-life situations, reflexivity is a form of engagement in and with the world, anchored in the very situated ecology of communication (that is, the social, material, corporeal, cognitive, emotional, in a word, multi-faceted situation). Through reflexive practices, individuals can achieve many goals: in addition to allowing people to describe and make sense of aspects of language and social life, reflexive practices enable them to claim legitimacy, express emotions, exercise authority, and even change social reality. The study of reflexive practices is thus a potent site to apprehend the social meaning of language and communication (Jaworski et al. 2004). It points to the fact that indexicalities are

fragmented, fractured, unstable, not necessarily shared, and deeply context-dependent (Blommaert 2015a, 2015b), set in a diversity of social situations and personal trajectories (Pérez-Milans 2016).

In a contemporary world defined by mobility, reflexivity may serve as a means to move across different layers of meaning (Coupland 2016). It works as an empowering resource that has the potential to unpack the possible mismatches between different indexicalities (Vitorio 2022). But what appears to be a potent tool for mutual understanding and empowerment can also be realized as a form of control of a social actor, group or system over another (Lønsmann 2014): reflexivity thus becomes a tool for regimenting language use and social relations. Adams' (2006: 525) claim that "[r]eflexivity in this context does not bring choice, just a painful awareness of the lack of it" becomes all the more palpable and worthy of further investigation in an era of late modernity where people are constantly and continuously prompted to be reflexive (Archer 2012; Merminod et al. 2015). One ought to underline that not all people experience the same call for reflexivity – they may not equally possess the same structural possibilities, abilities, motivations, or emotions to take part in reflexive practices (Pérez-Milans and Soto 2016). In view of this, the study of on-site processes of differentiation is a case in point, as it could well shed light on specific instances of the concrete manifestations of the politics of language and communication that are caught between individual agency and social structures.

While the study of metapragmatic discourse has admittedly been fixated on metapragmatic regimentation and typification as the crux of signification (cf. Reyes 2011), it should not be viewed as an approach that treats semiotic resources as objects that seem to get a "life of their own" and are independent of human agency. Rather, we view metapragmatic concepts as a potent and valid analytic framework to appreciate the dynamics of refusal and social reorganization—across different interactional contexts, such as networking events (Militello), business discourse (Gong), professional communication (Merminod), and even citizenship narratives (Vitorio). The contributions to this issue uncover "cracks in the structure" (Ortner 2006) of metapragmatic regimentation, which people may use to unsettle larger structures of asymmetry and inequality in society. By doing so, we foreground the role that people take in the reconfiguration of the "indexical fields" (Eckert 2008) of the signs they use in communication, that is, their contributions to the shape of specific "constellation[s] of meanings that are ideologically linked" (Eckert 2008: 464). We collectively argue that while such *in situ* and everyday semiotic practices may be viewed as banal or fleeting, they are palpably consequential because they reveal forms of doing/being which may enable concrete materializations of representation, recognition, and restitution. Thus, this issue

critically interrogates the affordances of metapragmatic concepts while showing how (the study of) reflexive practices serves as a viable resource for the understanding of language and society in continuously changing contexts.

4 A collaborative undertaking

The special issue stems from a panel we organized for the 23rd Sociolinguistics Symposium (*Unsettling Language Politics and Practices through Reflexivity: Metapragmatics and Language Ideologies*). As convenors of this panel, we carefully selected researchers who wanted to show how the study of situated reflexive practices could effectively unpack processes of differentiation and identity construction. At the conference, we had the opportunity to meet other scholars sharing the same concerns and, once we decided to plan a special issue, we invited them to participate in the project. To ensure that all the participants of the special issue were on the same wave, we continuously asked for their feedback during the writing of the proposal and the articles (email threads and online meetings). The internal coherence of the special issue has been ensured through this continuously collaborative process between the participants. We would like to express our warmest thanks to Eleanor Yue Gong, Jacqueline Militello, Miguel Pérez-Milans, Catrin Williams and Jonas Hassemer. We are extremely indebted to the past and present editorial boards of *Multilingua* for their trust and support throughout the writing and publication process. We are very grateful for the guidance we received from Ingrid Piller, Jürgen Jaspers, Eva Codó and the anonymous reviewers.

The special issue is composed of four full articles, followed by a final commentary. The contributions' interest in examining the role of reflexivity in on-site processes of differentiation is rooted in the goal of understanding the entanglement of issues of linguistic diversity with contemporary social life. The articles present critical investigations of language practices and ideologies across different contexts, affected by transnationalism and globalization.

Based on a linguistic ethnographic study on professional networking in Hong Kong, Jacqueline Militello's contribution analyzes the use of lexical categories that posit the individuals in profession-related hierarchies. Beyond their denotational meaning, these categories work as emblems (Agha 2007) invoking specific contextualizing universes, that is, indexical maps of ideologically loaded sets of cultural and social values that project axes of differentiation. Militello explains how emblems function in globalized contexts, where indexicalities are not always shared. Expanding Silverstein's (2004) work on folk rankings of U.S. based universities, Militello's study uncovers taxonomies that serve to classify professions, corporations and teaching institutions hierarchically. With a fine-tuned methodology that mixes

conversation analytic procedures of self-presentation sequences in networking events ("talk-in-interaction") with retrospective metapragmatic interviews of the participants to these events ("talk-out-interaction", see Blommaert 2005: 53–56), Militello is able to identify four configurations in which the emblems' indexical mapping goes wrong or is negotiated by the participants (misrecognition, partial recognition, transposition, and feigned recognition). Her study shows that these encounters are both strongly standardized (preeminence of the English language, types of occupation, structure of curricula) and highly diverse (people from different parts of the world and of different professional status). In such settings, where people from diverse walks of life gather, reflexivity is a way of navigating a *terra incognita* and a means for negotiating indexicalities. Militello's contribution convincingly demonstrates how metapragmatic interviews combined with the analysis of interactional data are useful for researchers, and can allow them to develop descriptive tools that visualize indexical maps in diagrams and facilitate the comparison between concurring indexicalities.

Eleanor Yue Gong provides a delicate account, ethnographically grounded and drawing on multiple data (survey, participant observation, semi-structured interview, collection of institutional texts), of the historical development of reflexive practices in a global corporation located in China. Against the backdrop of directly circumscribing reflexivity as a universal feature of human communication, her study illustrates how reflexive practices are affected by larger, socio-economic, forces (globalization, neoliberalism) and regulated in order to achieve practical ends. In her data, reflexivity acquires an extremely delineated meaning: the employees' ability to review in English what they (should, could, might, …) do at work. In such a context, reflexive practices are deemed as a tool to control employees, modify their behaviors and create axes of differentiation that lead to reward or sanction people. The use of reflexivity as a managerial tool is not an invention of late capitalism, but, as Gong argues, reflexive practices are recast in the mold of the neoliberal management of labor and become part of the workers' soft skills (Urciuoli 2008). Gong shows how reflexive practices evolve from being Mandarin-mediated and carried out as part of an audience of a podium event (collective reflexivity) to being English-mediated in small size groups where each participant is expected to take the floor and to speak (individual reflexivity). Such a transformation is produced through institutional training materials and events (manuals, trainings, scripts and iterative meetings) that naturalize the links between a type of reflexive practices and a given language (English). In line with studies on English in Asian global workplaces (e.g., Park 2021), Gong shows that in addition to being tools that direct employees to review their work, reflexive practices performed in English are indexicals that link the employees to values attached to English (mobility, flexibility, …).

Directing his attention to the global phenomenon that sees narratives becoming a key feature in politics, marketing and management, Gilles Merminod offers a detailed examination of the reflexive practices occasioned by storytelling guides, the narratives and ideologies they contain, and their assumptions about and implications for professional communication. Combining narrative analysis with metapragmatic concepts, the article unveils the vast semiotic potential of storytelling guides. These guides do more than simply outline idealized notions about professional communication, they prepare their readers for potential performances. Cornered between a stereotyped past and an idealized future, the narratives entextualized in these guides become proper indexicals, being both "trace-of" and "trace-for" language use: the former referring to how storytelling guides archivally record language use and the latter pertaining to how the guides set the scene for future communicative practices, such as the imposition of potential interpretations of ways of telling or the prescription of future lines of conduct. In this respect, the storytelling guides provide the readers with a cultural model of action that contains its own set of communicative logics and practices. Merminod shows how an indexical order (Silverstein 2003) is spelled out from such guides and takes shape as a specific register (Agha 2007). This register both differentiates storytelling from other narrative practices (such as bedtimes stories or novels) and from other communicative practices in professional settings and public speaking situations. In that, storytelling guides are sites of differentiation. Merminod shows how specific devices, such as *framing narratives* and *metanarrative formulations*, are used to convince the readers that transforming the world and moving up the social structure is not only possible but is something that is easily achievable if they subscribe to the storytelling guides' language ideologies, echoing the fetishization of communication skills in the realm of late capitalism (Urciuoli 2008). Along this way, storytelling guides promote an order of indexicality (Blommaert 2005) in which people who master storytelling practices are at the top of the social structure.

Drawing on an extensive fieldwork in Singapore, Raymund Vitorio delves into the reflexive practices enabled by research interviews, focusing on how accounts of emotions are used to negotiate existing indexicalities on citizenship. Through the analysis of new citizenship narratives – which he views as accounts of past experiences about the citizenship journeys of his research participants – Vitorio studies how new citizens discursively construct their identities along an axis of differentiation that is organized around a local/global dichotomy. To do so, he directs his attention to two object-signs (Agha 2007) – "familial relations" and "passports", respectively emblems of localness and globalness – and describes how these signs are inhabited and reconfigured by his participants. His analysis of citizenship narratives illustrates how metapragmatic concepts can integrate the analysis of emotions as a sensitizing heuristic, and paves the way for future works on emotions as

tools for contesting or confirming dominant indexicalities. Such an approach enables Vitorio to enter the research participants' particular sociolinguistic worlds (Johnstone and Kiesling 2008), and to enrich his understanding of signs, not only on how they are used by participants but also on how they are felt. As Vitorio shows, the research interview, being both a reflexive tool and a reflexive site, is a means to pinpoint the indexicalities of particular significant signs in a specific domain of social life. It is a useful locus to understand how people negotiate, reconfigure, or oppose existing indexicalities, provided that the researcher carefully avoids projecting his own indexicalities and is aware of his own positionality in this process. All in all, Vitorio's article, similar to all the other contributions to this special issue, is instrumental in de-essentializing regimenting indexicalities by showing how processes of sociolinguistic differentiation are carried out, (re)negotiatied, and experienced through reflexive practices.

Miguel Pérez-Milans concludes the special issue with a commentary in which he examines the strengths and challenges of the approaches that investigate sociolinguistic differentiation through reflexive practices. He shows that such approaches, beyond the mere identification of ideological constructs, are able to address not only the what and the how of sociolinguistic differentiation but also its causes and consequences in the life world. In his commentary, Pérez-Milans first reconsiders scholarly works that reduce reflexivity as a power located in the individual (Archer 2007). Drawing on his own experience as a researcher, he shows how these perspectives are unable to take into account the fact that reflexivity – as a feature of human language itself (Lucy 1993) – is deeply tied to indexicality, that is, context-dependent. Pérez-Milans then retraces the key questions that the contributions to the special issue collectively wanted to ask, and brings out the way they shed light on the language ideologies that undergird linguistic and communicative practices, and the role that these ideologies play in feeding existing semiotic inequalities or creating new ones. This review eventually leads Pérez-Milans to imagine further lines of research – such as integrating the metapragmatic study of on-site processes of sociolinguistic differentiation to the exploration of linkages across events – and to emphasize the relevance of having an interdisciplinary look at reflexive practices as a way to gain an in-depth understanding of the multiple entanglements of the linguistic and social orders.

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