In a series of later publications, Jan Blommaert, who has died at the age of 59, explicitly discussed the ways in which his thinking was the product of a lifetime of engaging with other scholars. In *Dialogues with Ethnography* and *Durkheim and the Internet*, both published in 2018 (2018a, 2018b), he wrote of the intellectual forebears and contemporaries who had provided him with the foundational ideas, the stimulation and opportunity for dialogue from which his own ideas were able to develop. For a vast number of people – both those who knew him personally and those who read his prodigious output of books, articles and online writings – Jan has played a similar role in intellectual life. He has been a crucial catalyst in developing the interest in, understanding of, and ways of approaching sociolinguistics for a generation of scholars. The ideas articulated in his work, as well as the ethos and approach that produced this work, have been profoundly influential for the discipline, advancing our understanding of the crucial ways in which language and communication lie at the heart of what constitutes society.

Although still in his fifties when he died, Jan managed to pack an incredible amount into his career, including spells working in universities across Europe, Africa and Asia, and presenting, lecturing and collaborating with colleagues across the world. His academic career began with his doctoral studies at Ghent University in 1989, with a thesis examining Swahili political discourse in Tanzania, before he then took up a lectureship at the same university. By the time he came to work at the University of London in 2005, which is where I first met him, his *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* had been published and was already establishing itself as a discipline-defining work. From London he went to work at Jyväskylä in Finland, before settling in Tilburg University in the Netherlands as Professor of Language, Culture and Globalization. In amongst this country-hopping he managed to fit in positions as guest professor on large research initiatives in both China and South Africa, while also maintaining a role as a public intellectual, addressing non-academic audiences as often as the opportunity allowed.
The pace of this professional activity almost inevitably took something of a toll on his health, and he was very candid about the effects of the burnout he suffered in the later years of his life. He used this experience not only to reflect on the nature of modern academia, but also to offer support and advice to younger colleagues (myself included) based on his own challenging experiences. From the moment of his diagnosis with stage 4 cancer in March 2020 he also embarked on a series of short, reflective writings and videos which provided retrospective highlights of some of the main focal points of this career. And it was in these reflections on the nature of academia and the role of the educator – and the way he had attempted, throughout his own working life, to enact his beliefs through what he called ‘knowledge activism’ – that his theoretical work and the values embodied in his practice of being a scholar came together to produce the profound influence he has had on the discipline and its community. In the remainder of this obituary I would like to reflect on the relationship between these two elements of Jan’s career – the theorist and the educational practitioner – and consider how the two complemented each other not simply in practical terms, but also in the way they shared the same ethical and epistemological foundations.

It is impossible, of course, to encapsulate the thinking of a person’s lifetime within a couple of thousand words. But if I were to try, a suitable starting point would be that the guiding principle of Jan’s work was to explore the ways in which ‘language’ as an object of study consists of the stuff used by actual people doing actual things as part of their everyday lives; and that at the same time, this object of study is also a complex of ideas about something called ‘language’, which are believed, acted upon, asserted and contested by those same people as part of the actions and practices of those everyday lives. The fact that all this is grounded in actual people’s actual experiences and beliefs ties it, inextricably, to the social and political structures by which people live, and thus the study of language is also the study of society and the power dynamics which animate it. In addition to this, of course, linguists themselves are also actual people, with embodied lives embedded in specific times and places, caught up in relationships and ontological and existential struggles. The study of language in society is not, then, a straightforward business by any means.

As academics we are constantly confronted with the issue of what precisely it is we are trying to understand (what is the object of our inquiry), as well as what it means to generate knowledge about this object. This project has to be carried out within a context of professional and personal circumstances which influence our ability and chances to pursue these two questions. We also then have to contend with finding ways to communicate this understanding as ‘knowledge’, and also, perhaps, to promote this knowledge as a catalyst for other actions such as activism or social engagement. All of these various different elements feed into the life of
research. And all of them are consequential in their own way, and thus worth reflecting upon as part of the process of identifying the questions, analysing the observations, and formulating the theories which constitute research. For me, Jan’s work has been especially helpful in trying to make sense of this multidimensional nature of research and scholarly inquiry, and the role that societal and political structures play in the generation, circulation and communication of knowledge.

His body of work combines a number of elements which contribute to this holistic picture of knowledge generation within the field of sociolinguistics. Possibly the most important of these is his focus on ethnography as not simply a method for researching human practices but as an epistemological approach to human understanding. He wrote extensively on this, and many of his essays on the topic are collected together in *Dialogues with Ethnography*. Related to this is the focus – and deep theorising – on the nature and significance of context: the way that communication is always embedded within particular historical and cultural environs, and that to make sense of it thus requires close attention to the cultural matrices which make any particular utterance or interaction meaningful.

Then there was the way he understood sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. The way he saw them as inextricably linked – so that to truly understand how people make meaning with language we need to look both at what they do with the communicative resources available to them (sociolinguistics), and at how it is that what they produce functions as meaningful within society (discourse). Once one takes this multifaceted perspective on communication one starts to realise that categories such as named languages (‘English’, ‘Swahili’) are not adequate to represent the resources people actually have recourse to, and that instead it’s necessary to look at how ‘bits’ of language – repertoires, registers, genres, etc. – are mobilized, and how these, when used within the particular context, generate dialogic meaning. The scope of Jan’s scholarship is such that almost every facet of this complex picture of communication has been theorised with attentive detail, often drawing upon, elaborating and adapting the canon of ideas which have shaped sociolinguistics as a discipline.

But the scope of his scientific worldview did not stop there. It also included an important advocacy for placing the study of language at the heart of the study of society. There are two aspects to his thinking on this. The first is that society, by its very nature, is about interaction between people; it is about the patterns identifiable in such interaction. Communication is the primary means by which this interaction takes place, so an understanding of how language (as well as other forms of semiosis) is used then contributes to – and also reflects – what constitutes what we call society more generally. He gives the example of the way that any serious knowledge of sociolinguistics will immediately debunk individualist conceptions of society.
Secondly there is the way that discourse, as a manifestation of ideology, is itself an organising element for society. Much of social reality is constructed, maintained or negotiated through discourse, so once again it is essential for an understanding of the social order to take a detailed and nuanced look at discourse. As he wrote in his obituary of Dell Hymes (2018a), if we wish to properly critique the injustices within society we must not be satisfied by merely reiterating the slogans of equality, we need to do the close work of identifying and analysing how inequality is embedded within social structures and practices, and sociolinguistics and discourse analysis can help us get to the very heart of these.

This sentiment leads us to the critique of how the institution of higher education has, in recent years, all too often allowed for such sloganeering to mask the way that this detailed and necessary work is becoming marginalised in pursuit of spurious public-relation notions such as ‘impact’. And this is where the practice and approach of Jan’s role as educator complements his theoretical and analytic project. That’s to say, the act of teaching, for him, was informed by precisely the same values and motivations as the pursuit of research.

This sort of approach was not unique to Jan by any means, but he was able at once to articulate many of the frustrations that people working in contemporary academia feel, while at the same time, to an extent at least, finding ways to enact the values that underpinned his vision of teaching and learning. In this way he tried to shape rather than live within the dominant culture of institutional education.

Modern conceptions of ethnography have long since left behind the conceit that it is the study of distant or ‘exotic’ cultures, but view it instead as an approach which is equally useful for exploring our understanding of the familiar cultures in which we live and operate. To this end it was inevitable, perhaps, that a devotee of ethnographic approaches to knowledge production would cast an ethnographic gaze on his own working practices and the culture in which he pursued these. Although never a dedicated research project, this self-reflection still produced very noticeable results – most prominently the essay Jan wrote towards the end of his life about ‘Looking back: What was important?’, and the multiple ways he found to publish his work via online Working Paper depositories, blog posts and editorials for the Diggit magazine, as well as short YouTube videos. All this reflected a commitment to a democratic and community-focused approach to education and learning, but it was also part of the epistemological ideals which characterised both his work and, I would like to suggest, his conceptualisation of sociolinguistics: knowledge itself as a form of interaction, a form of dialogue, a form of communication. Knowledge not as an abstracted, apolitical, walled-off entity, but rather something that people do, in much the same way that language is.
In discussing modern academia he was uncompromising in his rejection of the ideology of the competitive and strategic career, and the way that academic conventions as now constituted often create counter-productive, restrictive, and even stifling effects for scholarship. To his mind, the whole experience of what he called the ‘academic industrial culture’, with its performance measurements, its managerialism, its stress on individualism, and where quantity rather than quality was paramount (metrics being the arbiter of success), and the way this had been exploited by academic publishing, had become a barrier rather than a facilitator to science.

Here again, both the focus of his work, and the guiding principles by which he practiced that work were fully complementary. A central theme was inequality; a desire, as he wrote, to ‘understand why understanding itself is an object of inequality’ (2020). Yet the paradox of pursuing this within modern institutional academia is that it’s the practices of modern institutions, to which we, as employees, need to submit, which are themselves part of the problematic answer to this question. This led to Jan’s concept of ‘knowledge activism’: the developing of means to counter the increasing exclusivity and elitism which the neoliberal education system has produced.

This same problem threatened to corrupt the practice of teaching. Teachers, he rightly insisted, are not in the business of knowledge transfer. They are teaching students how to learn; guiding them in the art of identifying, observing and formulating questions; training them in techniques for looking at, seeing, and attempting to understand, what wasn’t previously noticed or appreciated. In other words, the aim of teaching, we might say, is to develop students as ethnographers of their own world.

In the journal article (2003) which gave rise to his 2010 book *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*, Jan cited the old adage that nothing is as practical as a good theory, and this was very much a sentiment that characterised his life’s work. The lasting impact on the discipline of sociolinguistics will be his wide-ranging and always insightful theoretical work, but also his dedication to ideals of social justice and the way he saw the roles of scholar, teacher and citizen as fundamentally interwoven.

References