Introduction

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Society in digital contexts: New modes of identity and community construction

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1 What this special issue is about

This thematic volume of sociolinguistic research focuses on identity and community construction at the interface of the local and the global, examining these phenomena using varied research methods and through the lenses of diverse analytical and theoretical perspectives. The papers highlight the intricacies inherent in identity and community construction in digitized contexts through the exploration of linguistic and semiotic resources, languages, and understudied cultural contexts as varied as the use of emojis to defy bias against female gamers online, initiation of repair on expert-authored blogs on weight loss, negotiation of language ideologies on Ukrainian Twitter, and the construction of political dissent on Arabic Syrian Facebook. The volume satisfies four additional aims: It (a) considers the local and global to be interconnected and mutually influencing, (b) conceptualizes and examines language as one of numerous semiotic resources, (c) explores online interaction as linked to interaction offline, and (d) acknowledges human agency and creativity. Collectively, the studies add to the ongoing quest for new ways to use and investigate language in society by examining the ways society manifests itself creatively in various languages and across globalized mediums.¹

¹ I am indebted to Jan Blommaert for coming up with the original special issue title “Society in Language,” as opposed to the traditional ideology “Language in Society.” The former stresses the need to upend sociolinguistic theory as we know and practice it. I later changed the title to

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The volume also emphasizes the need to continue to develop sociolinguistic theory and methodology in the context of contemporary communication practices. In doing so, the studies expand current discussions on the place of sociolinguistics and social media research in an increasingly globalized and digitized world. The remainder of this introduction contextualizes the studies by providing a synopsis of key factors in the study of the sociolinguistics of social media.

2 New directions in sociolinguistics

Calls for new directions in sociolinguistics abound, precipitated by rapid globalization (Bell 2016; Blommaert 2003, Blommaert 2010, Blommaert 2011, Blommaert 2016, Blommaert 2017a, and Blommaert 2018a; Coupland 2003, Coupland 2016; Park and Lo 2012; Rampton 1996, Rampton 1998) and technological revolution—particularly the spread of social media use across contexts and cultures (Androutsopoulos 2006, Androutsopoulos 2013; Barton and Lee 2013; Bou-Franch and Blitvich 2018; Georgakopoulou 2006; Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016; Lee 2017; Pennycook 2018). The sociolinguistics of globalization has, in particular, highlighted global identity construction in the context of multilingualism (e.g. Heller 2007; Park and Lo 2012) and language ideology, chiefly English as a global phenomenon (e.g. Rubdy and Alsagoff 2014). Despite the surge of research on social media from a discursive perspective (e.g. Herring 2004, Herring 2013a, and Herring 2013b), sociolinguistic examinations of identity construction conducted online apropos globalization have been notably absent, as pointed out by Androutsopoulos (2013) and Thurlow and Mroczek (2011). This is in spite the fact that language is simultaneously both a local and a global construct (Al Zidjaly 2006; Erickson 2004).² Notwithstanding the paucity of linguistic research on global and local identity construction online, the consensus among sociolinguists is that the digital turn has created emergent identities and practices that merit linguistic investigation using new research and methodology toolkits.³

“Society in Digital Contexts” to account for the multimodality of human interaction, aptly exemplified in the special issue.

² Erickson (2004) explains that talk/interaction is both local and global because talk itself takes place in real time among real social actors to satisfy immediate goals. At the same time, all interactions are also global, as they are always occasioned by processes that occur outside the immediate context.

³ I take the position that the lines between online and offline are porous, as argued by Barton and Lee (2013), Blommaert (2017a) and Locher et al. (2015), as people are “always on” and their

“New directions” for sociolinguistics is not an uncommon theme. The field of sociolinguistics has been built upon revisiting and readapting sociolinguistic concepts to match social reality. From the onset of the field, and through building on social and literary theorists (e.g. Bakhtin 1981; Goffman 1971), key sociolinguists (e.g. Hymes 1996; Ochs 1996; Silverstein 1976) had to upend traditional ideas about language, communication, and social groups to create a theory of *language in society* (Blommaert and Rampton 2011) wherein established concepts about identity and social integration are revisited. (Examples of such ongoing activity of sociolinguistics include: Barton and Lee 2013; Bell 1984; Blommaert 2003, Blommaert 2005; Coupland 1998, Coupland 2013, and Coupland 2016; Danesi 2015; Erickson 2004; Georgakopoulou 2007; Park and Lo 2012; Pennycook 2007, Pennycook 2018; Piller 2011, Piller 2016; Rampton 1996; Scollon 2001).⁴ The need to keep ‘the theory’ in dialogue with ever shifting social realities has intensified with the onset of globalization and technological advancement.⁵ An additional factor that has necessitated the reconceptualization of sociolinguistic concepts and methodologies has to do with the creativity and agency of social actors across the globe (especially in non-Western contexts) who have used and adapted social media platforms for their own strategic social, personal, and cultural purposes, thus, not only creating novel forms of interaction and integration but also new means to form communities.⁶ Social agency, however, has largely remained backgrounded as a key factor in redesigning a new theory of sociolinguistics capable of keeping alive the complexities inherent in communication—digital or otherwise (see Al Zidjaly 2014a, Al Zidjaly 2015, and Al Zidjaly 2019a for a discussion on social agency, activism, and linguistic research).

Blommaert (2016), a key leader in the new directions of sociolinguistics, divides recent movements towards a new theory of sociolinguistics into two

daily interactions are inextricably intertwined with new communication technologies (Baron 2008).

⁴ Other examples of sociolinguists building theory include Gumperz’s (1982) theory of conversational inference, Tannen’s (2001) work on the ambiguity and polysemy of linguistic strategies, Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) sociocultural linguistic approach to identity, Locher and Watts’ (2005) theorization of face and politeness as relational work, Du Bois’ (2007) stance triangle, and Al Zidjaly’s (2009, 2015) theorizing of agency (I am indebted to Cynthia Gordon for these specific examples).

⁵ Revisiting theories as a result of globalization and technological advances has been an activity in other fields as well (including disability studies), not just sociolinguistics (see Watson and Roulstone 2014).

⁶ See, for example, the use of social media in the Arab world (Al Zidjaly 2012, Al Zidjaly 2014a, Al Zidjaly 2014b, and Al Zidjaly 2017; Al Zidjaly and Gordon 2012).

periods. The first period, which Blommaert declares as largely accomplished, concerns a move from relative stability to mobility. In this move, superdiversity as an outcome of mobility (Blommaert and Rampton 2011; De Fina et al. 2017; Vertovec 2007) has succeeded in reconceptualizing key sociolinguistic concepts (e.g. multilingualism) by painting a more complex and dynamic view of social reality (e.g. the shift from code-switching to translanguaging). A second move, still in its infancy, concerns a shift from mobility to complexity (Blommaert 2016; Blommaert and De Fina 2015; Pennycook 2018). This shift aims to capture the intricacies of social organization and allows scholars to better theorize the murky and largely challenging concept of context (Cicourel 1964; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Scollon 2001). The move to complexity goes one step further than the earlier move to mobility by “reimagining the sociolinguistic phenomena and processes we intend to study” through acquiring a new “set of images and metaphors that appear to offer more and better analytical opportunities because they correspond better to the phenomena and processes we observe” (Blommaert 2016: 248–249). In short, a new research toolkit to capture identity in interaction is needed, as “the traditional vocabulary of linguistic analysis is no longer sufficient” (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 9).⁷

What is entailed in such research is a foregrounding of the inherent complexity in social (inter)actions through detailed analyses of case studies from across cultures, languages, and mediums. Such studies may include ethnography (with a focus on action Blommaert 2018e, this volume), as suggested by researchers of the sociolinguistics of globalization (e.g. Blommaert 2018b; Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Rampton 2006); multi-methods, as suggested by scholars of new media sociolinguistics⁸ (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2008; KhosraviNik 2016); integrative research frameworks (e.g. mediated discourse analysis Scollon 2001 and nexus analysis Scollon and Scollon 2004), as suggested by discourse analysts (e.g. Al Zidjaly 2019a; Georgakopoulou 2006).⁹ In this reimagination, the researcher’s task is to highlight the inherent multimodality of human interaction (Norris 2011; Scollon and LeVine 2004; van Leeuwen 2004) and complexity through unfolding “the complex and multifilar features and their various different origins that are contained in synchronized moments

⁷ According to Pennycook (2018), complexity entails the question of how much inclusion is too much. He thus raises the question of the cost of including everything in our theories and research projects.

⁸ In this volume I use computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2004) interchangeably with internet linguistic research (Crystal 2011; Herring and Androutsopoulos 2018) and new media sociolinguistics (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011) to refer to research that analyzes digital discourse.

⁹ For more new methods and approaches to digital discourse, see Blommaert (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e), Bou-Franch and Blitvich (2018), Gee (2014), and Pennycook (2018).

of understanding” (Blommaert 2016: 252). This is a vision that extends the contribution of many sociolinguistic scholars who have addressed the issue of complexity through their work (e.g. Erickson 2004; Pennycook 2007, Pennycook 2018; Piller 2016; Scollon and Scollon 2004; Tannen 2001) by providing a critical, qualitative, and bottom-up approach that contributes to social theory in general (not just sociolinguistics) with the aim to upend the existing “authoritative discourses” (Bakhtin 1981) of sociolinguistics and transforming them into “internally persuasive discourses” that are continuously negotiated.

3 Social media: Complex identity construction sites

No media highlight the complexity of contemporary social and interactive landscapes better than social media, as they illuminate ongoing identity construction across contexts and scenes. Social media not only provide sites where the local and the global encounter one another, but they also offer contexts wherein semiotic resources co-exist—often, but not always, easily accessible and used in the creation of communication characterized by seemingly endless forms and functions. To understand the relationship between social media and identity construction in globalized contexts, I provide below a synopsis of three key concepts: globalization, identity, and community.

3.1 Globalization

Drawing upon Appadurai (1996) and Castells (1996), Blommaert (2010: 13) defines globalization as referring to “the intensified flows of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the globe, driven by technological innovations mainly in the field of media and information and communication technology, and resulting in new patterns of global activity, community organization and culture.” The concept of globalization is non-linear and multifaceted (Coupland 2013), transforming the world into a complex place. As a result, Barton and Lee (2013) argue that when talking about language, the relation between the local and the global is best understood in terms of glocalization, defined by Koutsogiannis and Mitsiopoulou (2007: 143) as the “dynamic negotiation between the global and the local, with the local appropriating elements of the global that it finds useful, at the same time employing strategies to retain its identity.” To date, the focus in sociolinguistics has been on research that either globalizes the local (i.e. English

as a global language e.g. Rubdy and Alsagoff 2014) or foregrounds local appropriation of the global (e.g. localizing YouTube among Germans Androutsopoulos 2013 or localizing American hip hop music Pennycook 2007). Globalization, however, is a two-way medium (Barton and Hamilton 2005). Additionally, while the relationship between language and global identity construction has been studied extensively to date (see Barton and Lee 2013 for an overview), its examination in relation to new media has been largely backgrounded, as noted by Androutsopoulos (2013). This is where this special issue comes in.

What is needed are more case studies (and in due time more interdisciplinary research) that transcend binary theorization (i.e. globalising the local or localizing the global) by examining what people actually do at the interface of the local and the global in terms of the multimodal strategies used and for what ends.¹⁰ The interface of the local and the global has been referred to as *translocality*, a concept similar to the theorization of glocalization that has been argued to be key in examining how the local and global intersect specifically in multi-semiotic digital environments (Kytölä 2016).¹¹

A recent example of research I have conducted in this spirit considers how citizens in Oman use emojis on WhatsApp to mitigate face threatening acts of dissidence in their Islamic Arabic cultural context, which highlights placidity and uniformity. Citizens simultaneously localize a global semiotic resource and globalize a local issue (i.e. government corruption), thereby constructing a new 'hybrid' identity: A placid Omani dissident that the Omani government is heeded to notice (see Al Zidjaly 2017). An additional example involves my documenting of complex identity work by an online community of anonymous former or "ex-" Muslims on Arabic Twitter (note that for political and religious reasons the identity of ex-Muslims cannot for the time being exist outside of social media).¹² Through creating tweets that draw upon various discourses, actions

¹⁰ van Leeuwen and Suleiman (2013) have made a similar argument.

¹¹ The interface of the local and the global also points to Inda and Rosaldo's (2008: 11–12) idea that "globalization implies a heightened entanglement of the global and local such that, while everyone might continue to live local lives, their phenomenal worlds have to some extent become global as distant events come to have an impact on local spaces, and local developments come to have global repercussions."

¹² I refer to the actions I captured on Arabic Twitter as involving complex identity work because I found it difficult to insightfully interpret and analyze the tweets shared on this community of ex-Muslims and capture their immediate and yet to be realized effects on identity without drawing on a plethora of methodological frameworks, pushing theorizing on social identities into new, multimodal territories, and taking into consideration smaller and larger scale discourses and practices about Islam, Muslim countries, and globalization. Of particular

and linguistic and multimodal strategies, I demonstrate how a group of Arabs with no offline legitimacy manages to not only create an active ‘light’ community online but also to contribute to convincing hundreds of other Muslims (by their own admission on #whyleftIslam) to renounce Islam, an act punishable by death in Islamic countries, and an act destined to change the very fabric of Arab societies ingrained in religion (see Al Zidjaly 2019a, Al Zidjaly 2019b for details). Therefore, Coupland (2013, 2016) rightly argues that social analysis needs to be framed in relation to an increasingly globalized society. I add to this the proposal (following Blommaert 2016, Blommaert 2017a, and Blommaert 2018a) that linguistic research needs to explore identity construction at the nexus of the local and the global, regardless of how fleeting, malleable, and seemingly inconsequential such actions and identities might seem (i.e. regardless of their *lightness*).

3.2 Identity

Like globalization, identity is also demanding and multi-layered (Coupland 2016), best examined, sociolinguists have demonstrated, within a social constructivist approach (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2005; De Fina et al. 2006). Thus, Lee (2017: 55) notes that identities are “always open to reappropriation, recontextualization, and transformation” and that they require constant revisiting in light of technological advances and the resulting and interconnected social dynamics—such as in the present era of ubiquitous social media use across the globe. As globalization intensifies identity construction processes, Blommaert (2005: 207) argues that identity is best conceived as “particular forms of semiotic potential, organized in a repertoire.” Analytically, conceiving of identity in terms of participants’ access to a range of mobile resources that potentially could be drawn upon to enact (or perform, per Goffman 1959) certain kinds of identities (Rampton 1999, Rampton 2001) highlights human agency, creativity, and unpredictability. In line with the second move of sociolinguistics from mobility to complexity, Blommaert (2015a, 2015b) additionally suggests conceiving of identities as chronotopes

interest were those discourses occurring in the Arabian Gulf, the cradle of Islam. That is, to create (and capture) cultural revolution, the members of the ex-Muslim community, their followers, and I as a researcher had to negotiate all types of higher and lower level actions and discourses (Lemke 2000; Norris 2011) to incite (and sociolinguistically capture the impetus of) cultural revolution (see Al Zidjaly 2019a, Al Zidjaly 2019b for details).

(Blommaert and De Fina 2015) especially in digitized contexts.¹³ The Bakhtinian idea of chronotope (literally meaning time/place Bakhtin 1981) invokes orders of indexicality framed in terms of time and place (Blommaert 2005; Blommaert and De Fina 2015). This complex view of identity construction, constrained by access to resource mobility and framed chronotopically, eradicates simplistic and dichotomist views of identity construction (as local/global) and foregrounds a view of identity as complex interactive negotiations that merit various levels of contextualization.¹⁴ It also opens up a space to examine light identities—ludic, loosely-formed, ephemeral formations enabled by social media that, according to Blommaert (2016, 2017b, 2018a), are key to social organization (in contrast to the oft sociolinguistically foregrounded thick identities [e.g. nationality, race]).

That identities are complex is not new to sociolinguistics (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Piller 2016; Schifffrin 2000); but what is new is the need to keep the theory and methodology up with the heightened degree of complexity and diversity exemplified in identity construction in increasingly digitized and translocalized contexts.

3.3 Community

A major challenge to sociolinguistics, according to Coupland (2016: 32), is the concept of ‘community,’ which Herring (2004) calls ‘inherently abstract,’ originally theorized as “local, face-to-face mutual engagement [in speech communities, in social networks, or in communities of practices].” Efforts, however, have been established to properly retheorize the traditional concept of community within sociolinguistic research in light of globalization (see e.g. Coupland 2010; Rampton 1998, Rampton 1999, and Rampton 2006). Rheingold (1993) coined the term ‘virtual community’ to conceptualize digitally mediated affiliations, in particular. From its inception, Herring (2004) argues, the term attracted both attention (as a tool to understand how the Internet facilitates relationship creation e.g. Zappavigna 2011, Zappavigna 2012) and philosophical and methodological criticism. Early research on online discourse highlights the properties of virtual communities (i.e. what makes online different than offline communities Herring

¹³ Norris (2011: 30) uses the term “identity elements” to capture the chronotropic aspect of identity. In her words, “identity is embedded and (co)produced in the social-time-place of a particular social actor together with other social actors, together with and within the historical time, together with cultural tools, and together with and within the environment.”

¹⁴ For more on the complexity of identity construction, see Piller (2016) and Seargeant and Tagg (2014).

1999). Herring and Androutsopoulos (2018) argue that as the lines between online and offline blurred, researchers from the second wave of linguistic Internet studies moved from examining discourse on virtual communities as standalone to examining how social actors mediate online/offline social realities (e.g. Jones 2009). Recent research has further moved from examining self-presentations and member profiles online (Page 2010) to investigating the micro-discursive features and interactive patterns used by participants to form communities (e.g. Baym 1995, Baym 2015; Gordon 2015; Graham 2007, Graham 2018; Seargeant and Tagg 2014; Vasquez 2014).

These examinations have highlighted the inadequacy of the term ‘virtual community’ in capturing the kind of simultaneously fleeting and unbounded, yet real and somehow identifiable communities created based on choice, access, shared interest, and/or goals, with percolating effects to offline realities (what is referred to in the papers presented in this collection as *light identities* following Blommaert 2017b, Blommaert 2018a). As a result, a plethora of new terms have been proposed with varying degrees of success, such as: affinity groups (Gee 2005; Gee and Hayes 2011), imagined solidarity (Kramsch and Boner 2013), ambient affiliation (Zappavigna 2011, Zappavigna 2012), communities of knowledge or chronotopes “in which specific identity resources can be formed, learned and policed” (Blommaert 2017b: 123), and light communities (Blommaert 2017b, Blommaert 2018a; Blommaert and Varis 2015). Collectively, research indicates that the numerous factors characterising digital communication—including absence of physical space and ease of anonymity, the agency of social actors, the abundance of multimodal resources with various degrees of accessibility, and the blurring of online/offline social realities—give way to a surplus of new forms of social integration, the kind sociolinguists never had to deal with before, resulting in new challenges for language in society research that merit immediate and adequate identification, examination, and sociolinguistic theorization.¹⁵

4 Society in language: An overview of studies

Sociolinguistics as we know it is metamorphosing in favor of critical constructivism, complexity, fluidity, transience, and multiple forms of semiosis (Bell 2016;

¹⁵ These new kinds of uses and challenges have led some scholars (e.g. Rymes and Leone 2014) to create the subfield of citizen sociolinguistics.

Blommaert 2016; Pennycook 2018). This shift requires a sociolinguistic reimagination built upon bottom-up critical and qualitative research that engages with an updated agenda of new media sociolinguistic research that highlights the integration of research methods (e.g. multimodality, ethnography and discourse analysis), ethics, and ideologies. The shift further necessitates examining interaction in the context of ‘light’ groups, so-called ludic communities of knowledge, which have traditionally been dismissed within mainstream empirical and theoretical sociological literature. In contrast, this issue deliberately considers light groups and participants’ identity construction behavior, as, per Blommaert, they inform our understanding of contemporary social reality and, I argue, current debates in new media sociolinguistics.

4.1 The question of revisiting linguistic concepts

Cynthia Gordon’s sociolinguistic take on “Other-Initiated Repair and Community-Building in Health and Weight loss Blogs” highlights the need to test and, in time, retheorize established linguistic strategies in light of new forms of interaction. This necessity was emphasized by Blommaert (2018c) in his argument for the validity of retheorizing context as chronotopes. Whereas context seems ever-problematic, repair, a communicative sub-process key to the organization of human interaction (Schegloff et al. 1977), has been generally conceptualized as formulaic, interactive, and limited in function (i.e. mainly connection or disconnection).¹⁶ In this one of very few examinations of repair on social media (and the first in blogs), Gordon presents a deeper, more complex look into the mechanisms of other-initiated repair in anonymous user comments, theorizing repair as a light practice which highlights cultural expectations while creating fleeting moments of community-building. The analysis also identifies a new type of repair—that of images—which cements the postulation by Schegloff (2007) that any aspect of turn can be repaired and demonstrates the multimodality of repair made visible by social media users. The detailed analysis of the workings of repair maintains the need to transcend comparative approaches (e.g. online verses offline differences in use) to contextual approaches that consider the nature and goal of communities in examining semiotic resources.

¹⁶ Few exceptions exist, including Meredith and Stokoe (2014).

4.2 The question of political activism and ethics

Francesco Sinatora's examination of "Chronotopes, Entextualization and Syrian Political Activism on Facebook" engages in two firsts: It is the first sociolinguistic documentation of Syrian Arabic dissident identity (on Facebook) and it is one of the first qualitative, critical, mixed methods studies that in my opinion complicates the debate on the relationship between social media and activism (whether social media lead to social change Al Zidjaly 2014a or slacktivism Morozov 2011). This debate gripped both academia and the public on Twitter in 2018 preceding the mid-term American elections. The Syrian Arab Spring example demonstrates the chronotopic constraints of such connections by larger discourses of politics and economics (Al Zidjaly 2018). As a documentation of political dissent in a region that lacks freedom of expression, the paper, most importantly, touches upon the question of academic ethics and ideologies, a main objective of the third wave of new media sociolinguistics (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016). As researchers of Arabic political activism, Francesco and I have had many a great discussion about the dangers of using the real names of his research participants.¹⁷ This second study is thus unique in its examination of chronotopes in the context of political activism, contribution to sociolinguistics, and the raising of concerns (albeit indirectly) that all academics, especially those involved in activism research, must heed.

4.3 The question of user comments and grassroots movements

Alla Tovaresh's account of "Negotiating "Thick" Identities Through "Light" Practices: YouTube Metalinguistic Comments About Language in Ukraine" demonstrates the shift in new media sociolinguistic research from examining self-presentations online to examining users' metalinguistic comments, which the author aptly theorizes as light practices that can create digital inclusion or exclusion from particular language ideologies and social groups.¹⁸ This study also is one of the few extant sociolinguistic examinations of balancing

¹⁷ See Al Zidjaly (2019a) to learn more about the dangers of conducting activism research in religiously and politically volatile Arabic contexts. It should be noted that Alla Tovaresh and Cynthia Gordon were also part of the discussion on the ethicality of using names and usernames in our academic research.

¹⁸ Refer to Al Zidjaly (2010) and Seargeant and Tagg (2014) to find more about this shift in sociolinguistics from the examination of self presentations to user comments.

translocality and audience design (i.e. harmonizing between local attitudes and global themes in an understudied online space). It additionally is an empowering documentation (akin to Francesco Sinatra's study on Syrian activism), as the study contributes to debates on social media and inclusion by presenting a bottom-up critical example of how inclusion/exclusion is realized through Bakhtin's (1981) "heteroglossia with awareness." This study further is a distinctive examination of *surzhyk*, a complex nonstandard Russian-Ukrainian mixed variety that reflects the intricacies of language ideologies among Ukrainians. Through "engaging with policing, reifying, and contesting the existing language ideologies in Ukraine," Tovares argues, "YouTube commenters' voices help create a foundation for grassroots ideological and political mobilization that privileges complexity over homogeneity." This is an example of Ukrainian society (and a grassroots movement) revealing itself through language.

4.4 The question of semiotics and digital inclusion

The discourse on social media and inclusion is further discussed by Sage Graham in "A Wink and a Nod: The Role of Emojis in Forming Digital Communities," which is a prime example of the second move in sociolinguistics from mobility to complexity. This is a multifaceted examination of the role of emojis—a main, intricate, and ever-changing feature of digital interaction—in managing gender bias and forming digital, ludic communities. Accordingly, this study is a quintessential demonstration of the exceptional wave of research featured in this volume that transcends simplistic, binary conceptualizations of semiotic resources (e.g. emoji as phatic and emotive communicative tools) and contextualizes them instead as multifaceted, interactive, and mitigative of the local and the global, creating immediate, gendered, and cultural inclusion in a relatively hostile digital platform facing women. In this way, the study contributes to debates on digital discourse and marginalization (in particular as apropos to women and gaming). Hitherto, these debates have argued for a direct link (Salter & Blodgett 2017: 75); in contrast, this paper demonstrates how such inclusion is realized through an interplay between emojis and language. The findings paint a complex view of emojis as tools for forming, defining, and reinforcing global norms of communities, demonstrating, as a result, how society (with all its biases, norms of interaction, and community-building challenges) is revealed through the lens of emojis in interaction with language.

Jan Blommaert brings the volume to an end in an intriguing, thought-provoking epilogue wherein he discusses the papers in light of current discourses, his own ground-breaking research, and future directions of a new reimagined sociolinguistics.

5 Concluding remarks

By situating itself at the interface of the sociolinguistics of globalization and new media, this special issue contributes to productive discourses on a new theorization of sociolinguistics more attuned to reality and contributes to an ongoing and increasing need for innovative sociolinguistic theorizing and methodologizing in the age of globalization and digitization of communication. A new direction for sociolinguistics necessitates, as Blommaert argues in the epilogue, a re-imagining of both our social world and the lenses through which it is experienced, with a focus on social action. This reimagination, I argue, further necessitates highlighting under-represented contexts and cultures, often utilizing interdisciplinary and multimodal work. This is especially true in contexts that lack access to voice and opportunities, as it is in such contexts that the intricacies of social realities are revealed and our research tools are tested. As online and offline realities are not only intertwined, but they feed into each other and lead at times to historical change (see Aarsand 2008; Al Zidjaly 2019a, Al Zidjaly 2019b), the new sociolinguistic reimagination (and the new wave of new media sociolinguistics) I further argue necessitates examining how online activities trickle into and transform social realities and vice versa, because what happens online is changing the very fabric of many societies. And it is imperative for sociolinguistics to capture these changes in infancy if it intends to remain relevant.

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Note

All the contributors in this special issue took part in the international conference I organized and chaired in Oman (with Jan Blommaert as Plenary Speaker): Third International Conference on Language, Linguistics, Literature and Translation: Connecting the Dots in a Globalized World. The conference took place on November 3–5, 2016 and was hosted by the Department of English Language and Literature (College of Arts and Social Sciences) at Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman.

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