

Do we still belong to speech communities? Mobility, the loss of indexical knowledge, and the primacy of denotational meaning

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The experience of linguistic globalization, and the communicative disorder it entails, requires a serious retooling of most basic units of sociolinguistic analysis—foremost among them the speech community. The chaos and indeterminacy of contemporary flows of people, knowledge, texts, and commodities across social and geographical space affects the sociolinguistic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. In particular, we can no longer assume that shared knowledge, especially indexical knowledge, can still serve to bind people together, negotiate conflicts, and share/transmit discourses. Using data from multiple ethnographic sites (from digital social networks to asylum hearings), this paper documents the renewed reliance on denotational references as a primary strategy to handle the fragmentation and ambivalence of contemporary communication and to establish power asymmetries (Jacquemet 2005). The claim of this paper is that it is time to go beyond a “linguistics of contact” (Pratt 1987, 1991; Rampton 1998) to examine the transidiomatic strategies (such as denotational-heavy interactional moves) which are the basic units of a sociolinguistics of xenoglossic becoming, transidiomatic mixing, and communicative recombinations.

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