# Introduction: the sociolinguistics of exclusion: indexing (non)belonging in mobile communities

Bock, C. F., Busch, F., Truan, N.A.L.

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Introduction: The sociolinguistics of exclusion – Indexing (non)belonging in mobile communities

Cornelia F. Bock [a], Florian Busch [b], Naomi Truan [c],*

[a] Universität Hamburg, Germany
[b] University of Bern, Switzerland
[c] Leiden University, the Netherlands

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The special issue on 'The sociolinguistics of exclusion: Indexing (non)belonging in mobile communities' delves into the phenomenon of exclusion as a means and outcome of social positioning within diverse communities undergoing continual transformation due to social, demographic, political, and technological changes. Through empirical studies that critically engage with exclusionary discourse practices, this issue analyzes the semiotic means that social actors employ to presuppose and/or entail exclusion. Additionally, it explores the underlying ideological assumptions on which these choices are perceived, rationalized, justified, and/or contested as exclusionary.

This special issue,[1] entitled 'The sociolinguistics of exclusion: Indexing (non)belonging in mobile communities', explores semiotic practices of exclusion as a means of social positioning in highly diverse communities that are constantly being transformed by social, demographic, political and technological change. Five papers and a commentary explore the complex interplay between semiotic practices and ideologies that underpin social positioning across a range of mobile social contexts. In this sense, the papers exemplify a 'Sociolinguistics of Exclusion'—a term we use to indicate a research focus rather than a fixed discipline. The term has emerged from long-standing phenomena which, however, have become more salient and extend to larger scales of social life in "liquid modernity" (Bauman 2012), and therefore require contemporary sociolinguistic study. In what follows, we briefly outline these global processes of ongoing change and discuss how they relate to exclusionary discourse practices. Finally, we provide an overview of the articles included.

## 1. Connecting to others in late modernity

Mobility and technological advances have been and continue to (re)shape and diversify the social world, as well as the discourses and interactions within it. This is especially true in the "global era" we live in, as Coupland (2010) calls it:

> Different views are held about whether late modernity and globalization (or, more accurately, the social condition of globality) can be, or need to be, distinguished theoretically. But many of the key conditions associated with late modernity heightened cultural reflexivity and social complexity, indeterminacy and hybridity in personal and social

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identities, changed thresholds of risk and trust, increased emphasis on individual life projects and responsibilities, detraditionalization and the decline of institutions […] are much easier to appreciate if we situate them in the dynamics of a more globally connected world. (Coupland 2010: 5–6)

Coupland's take on the intensity and complexity of late modern relationships is situated against the background of a "more globally connected world"—which Blommaert understands as one of the tenets of a "sociolinguistics of globalization" (2010). Thirteen years later, as we are writing the introduction to this special issue, increased connectedness has become even more prevalent. While connectedness may have initially referred primarily to increased geographical or social mobility, the last decade has shown that it now fully encompasses the online world as well, thus blurring the boundaries between 'online' and 'offline' even further, leading to what Blommaert et al. (2019) call the "online-offline nexus".

These continuous changes have a profound impact on the dissemination of semiotic practices and the ideologies attached to them as well as on communities (Blommaert 2018: 45). As more and more people come in contact with each other online as well as offline, the need to position oneself and others, to delineate group boundaries and thus to differentiate oneself from other people and groups increases (Bauman 2012: 108). Crucially, people also become more aware of the changes in social relations and their growing complexity due to the interconnectedness and availability of global and local structures, norms, and ideologies.

Interconnectedness not only increases the complexities of mobile communities, but also their flexibility and unpredictability, which Bauman (2012) encompasses with the term "liquid modernity". In "liquid modern times", constant change is simultaneously goal and condition. Liquid modernity fundamentally lacks stability and security: "Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects—but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change" (Bauman 2012: viii).

Especially in liquid modern times, not only goods, information, and people are in constant flux, but also semiotic resources. The mobility that characterizes liquid modern times is thus a mobility of semiotic forms, a potentiation of their indexical power. Re-contextualizations (Bauman & Briggs 1990) and re-enregisterments (Watts & Morrissey 2019) shape the everyday semiotic life of a networked and constantly transforming society. It is the indexical potentials of forms that become increasingly fluid, belonging simultaneously to different contexts, serving for identification and differentiation within different groups, and constantly shifting between different attributions of power.

The contributions in this special issue tackle these dynamics in societies shaped and continuously transformed by mobility. The issue's focus on mobile communities is not based on a dichotomy between rigid versus mobile communities, because communities are and have never been fixed. Nevertheless, there are moments and events in the history of societies that trigger and/or accelerate change (upheavals of political systems, digitalization, catastrophes, wars, etc.). The breadth of possible instances of such historical moments and their potential impact on specific communities becomes apparent through the papers, as each paper focuses on distinct social settings and various community types affected by a wide array of events.

## 2. The semiotics of exclusion

With these societal complexities in view, the papers of this issue delve into the multifaceted realm of (non)belonging, investigating the intricate semiotic practices through which exclusionary dynamics shape mobile communities and the everyday experiences of individuals living *in* or *alongside* these communities. Our understanding of 'social exclusion' is thus not only socio-economic, but also covers any kind of dynamics between actors, which on the one hand presuppose the existence of a social group and on the other hand index the non-belonging of individuals to this group. Social exclusion is thus a communicative phenomenon that we can observe at different social scales—from everyday interaction to (inter)national policy making. Accordingly, the contributions we gather under this theme explore a wide range of semiotic distinctions that actors draw upon to produce social exclusion. In this regard, this special issue is about a range of communicative practices that actors in various cultural contexts use to establish and rationalize "axes of differentiation" (Gal and Irvine 2019)—the sometimes broad, sometimes fine ideological distinctions people foster and use to make sense of the social fabric that surrounds them.

The papers in this issue thus follow in the tradition of work from different branches of sociolinguistics that has explored exclusionary language use in recent decades (Heller 1995; Thurlow and Jaworski 2010; Wodak 2011; Piller 2012; Purkarthofer 2021, to name only a few inspiring pieces), thinking further about how linguistic forms, practices, and language ideologies are interrelated when language is used as a means of social exclusion. Drawing on the interweaving of semiotic structure, communicative activity, and cultural ideology (what Silverstein (1985) has referred to as "total linguistic fact"), the papers of this issue demonstrate how social exclusion through language is continuously negotiated and interactionally enacted within communities.

Insofar as ingroup and outgroup construction go hand in hand, these exclusionary practices are always accompanied by processes of social inclusion as the other side of the coin. Nevertheless, the papers in this special issue focus their analytical lens on exclusionary practices, as these may be more difficult to capture empirically (since it may be unclear how to index who is not part of a group, as the 'Other' is not always apparent to group members). All the papers share the hope of suggesting new ways of achieving social inclusion through a better understanding of exclusion.

For this, the starting point is always semiotic action. By analytically accessing various fluid contexts in which late-modern individuals participate, the papers trace exclusionary dynamics by focusing primarily on semiotic forms and/or sets of forms that gain social value in the discourses of the communities under study. The analytical spotlight is on semiotic resources that

enable social distinction because they are recognizable by the actors involved as socially meaningful *styles* in the sense of Eckert (2008). As social actors either align with these styles or highlight dissociations through their own communicative behavior, they perform social positioning (Bucholtz & Hall 2005; De Fina 2013; Spitzmüller 2013).

To comprehend how these positioning processes are structured in the accelerated discourses of mobile communities, the papers in this issue pursue the following two questions:

1) What semiotic means do social actors use to presuppose and/or entail exclusion?
2) On which ideological assumptions are these choices perceived, rationalized, justified and/or contested as exclusionary in mobile communities?

The special issue aims to answer these questions in the light of liquid modern times by focusing on those social-communicative phenomena in which (social as well as linguistic) boundaries are blurred and constantly negotiated—and, accordingly, in which inclusion and exclusion are not fixed but constantly contested, reinterpreted, and performed.

## 3. The papers of this issue

The papers in this special issue empirically show how different social actors perform positioning and identity work in concrete local settings dealing with mobile communities—transitory constellations of contexts that merge, overlap, and are characterized by constant reorganization and the emergence of new communicative practices (e.g., digital practices in German, Lithuanian and Norwegian; refugee women in a Turkish city; orthography and writing reforms in Montenegro). In addition, this issue focuses on non-Anglophone communities, thus contributing to the decentering of perspectives on understudied languages and discourses (Arabic, German, Lithuanian, Montenegrin, Norwegian, Turkish).

In the first paper, "Punctuating the other: Graphic cues, voice, and positioning in digital discourse", Jannis Androutsopoulos analyzes social positioning in German online discourse using a specific set of semiotic resources—punctuation. In this context, punctuation both imitates and ridicules the 'Other', thereby indexing socio-political groups or personae from which writers wish to distance themselves. By tracing the emergence of the 'indignation mark' or <!!1!> in German-language discussion forums, the paper shows how people use its pragmatics to mark an utterance as a stylized, political 'voice', i.e., to index certain (political) stereotypical groups or personae whose worldviews the authors do not share.

Theresa Heyd also focuses on German digital discourse that uses semiotic means to evoke a specific social persona that writers wish to mock. In her paper "First names and sociolinguistic enregisterment: Digital tropes of linguistic mobility", she demonstrates how personal names can be part of enregisterment processes by constructing characterological figures. The analysis shows that the discursive creation of *Lisa*, a young German woman who spent a gap year in Australia and is perceived as entitled and superficial, builds on linguistic as well as extralinguistic enregisterment and visual semiotics, and it illustrates its relation to larger discourses of cosmopolitanism, eliteness, and gender.

The theme of the exclusionary power of written language continues in the next paper by Katharina Tyran, "Indicating ideology: Variation in Montenegrin orthography". Tyran analyzes specific orthographic varieties in Montenegrin that are not only stylistic choices but also ideologically charged, serving as "a semiotic practice of extra-lingual exclusion and intra-lingual stylistic differentiation". The paper highlights the importance of language ideologies and their links to (national) identity politics among the mutually intelligible post-Serbo-Croatian orthographies.

The next two papers also consider exclusion and belonging in a physical sense, examining positioning activities among labor migrants and refugees, respectively. In "Indexing the 'included' migrant? Social categorization and interpersonal digital interaction between labor migrants, teachers and employers in Norway", Hilde Thyness & Kristin Lexander examine the co-construction of identities and the stereotypes associated with them in a society characterized by mobile communities: migrant workers and locals in digitally mediated interactions. They show what semiotic practices are used to index inclusion or exclusion, and what role the language ideology of 'correctness' plays.

Hasret Saygi's paper, "A linguistic ethnography of the sense of belonging: Iraqi Turkmen women refugees in Turkey", also uses interactional data to identify refugee women's discursive positioning practices in producing a sense of (non)belonging in their new environment. She identifies three identity claims—the search for belonging through Turkishness, the construction of (be)longings for Iraq, and the fear of identity loss (Turkification)—that reveal the women's struggles to construct belonging and position them in a liminal stage.

In his commentary, Scott Kiesling summarizes the focal points of the papers in this special issue and highlights the common themes of exclusion, ideology, and linguistic style by drawing on Gal and Irvine's (2019) work *Signs of Difference.*

Taken together, these five papers and Kiesling's commentary examine a wide range of different contexts, but their bundling also exemplifies the ideological fabrications and charges of linguistic practices through which societies repeatedly set in motion dynamics of social exclusion. Ultimately, this special issue contributes to illuminating new empirical perspectives on complex practices of social positioning in increasingly diverse societies in liquid modern times.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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