

Communicative competence in an era of super-diversity

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As Steven Vertovec (2014) comments, his original aim in introducing the concept "super-diversity" he intended to address the changing nature of global migration that over the past 30 years or so, has brought with it a "diversification of diversity". This has occurred not just in terms of movements of people reflecting more ethnicities, languages and countries of origin, but also in respect to a multiplication of variables that affect where, how and with whom people live. This thematic concept has been taken up recently in many social science disciplines to explore the rapid pace of social change and global realignments of nations. From the standpoint of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, Blommaert and Rampton (2012) have built on the concept to expose not only deficiencies in the analysis of social policies affecting multilingualism in social institutions but also to call for a re-consideration of some of the basic tenets of sociolinguistics. Sociolinguistics founded on the premise that linguistics needed to pay attention to diversity of languages spoken by people in real life settings across a multiplicity of places, ethnicities and cultures, began life in a post-colonial world after the social upheavals of World War 2 (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2008). And central to sociolinguistics is the concept of "communicative competence". Although Hymes initially gave only a limited delineation of this concept, focusing on its contrast with Chomskyan linguistic competence, explanation in his "Foundations of Sociolinguistics" (1974) emphasized simply "the need for a child to be able to participate in its society as not only a speaking but also participating member." Over time communicative competence has found resonance with everyday explanations about language in social interaction, as its uses shifted from its original intent as part of Hymes' descriptive sociolinguistics to become part of applied linguistics, then language pedagogy (Byam 1997). Some of the later uses lead to criticisms of the concept itself. The paper will re-examine this issue by exploring the sociolinguistic diversity characteristic of much urban life, where daily living requires understanding the pragmatics of more than one language and more than one world view. As a result we need to look again at some of the basic assumptions that we make in "doing sociolinguistics" and working with pragmatics of everyday language.