



Glimpses from the Sociolinguistics Summer School 8 –

COST New Speakers Training School –

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Elisabeth Holm

Heriot-Watt University

With the overarching themes of New Speakers, multilingualism, language and inequality, agency in language policy and language use in the social media at the centre, some forty dedicated PhD students and early career researchers from around Europe and North America gathered in Barcelona for a four-day intensive Training School with the common aim of focusing on sociolinguistics. As all participants presented aspects of their own research, which demonstrated great variety in areas of interest, backgrounds, approaches, contexts and questions, the common purpose was knowledge sharing, engaging in discussions and learning. As outcomes are always individual, and related to fields of interest, this event catered for ample networking and learning opportunities. Furthermore, as a doctoral research journey may be a solitary path to tread on and pursue, comprising emotions spanning from agony to ecstasy, events like these are warmly welcomed by early career researchers. On the whole, the event was inspiring and enriching.

As announced on the SSS8 homepage, “The Sociolinguistics Summer School is an annual international meeting point for postgraduate students and early career researchers where they have the opportunity to present their first findings, as well as to attend plenary sessions and workshops conducted by experienced researchers” (<https://sss8barcelona.wordpress.com/>). As this year’s Sociolinguistic Summer School was hosted by staff and research students at UOC, who are active members of the New Speakers Network, SSS8 was part of the activities programmed by the IS1306 COST Sociolinguistic Network on New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe. As defined by O’Rourke and Pujolar (proposers of the EU COST Action 1306 on New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe) new speakers include all “multilingual citizens who, by engaging with other languages other than their “native” or “national” language(s), need to cross existing social boundaries, reevaluate their own levels of linguistic competence and creatively (re)structure their social practices to adapt to new and overlapping linguistic spaces” (Memorandum of Understanding COST Action IS1306, 2013:3).

Located within a historical building of the University of Barcelona, at the Faculty of Philology, the COST New Speakers Training School and SSS8 venue was full of atmosphere and ideally located in Barcelona’s city centre, Catalonia’s multilingual capital. The Organising Committee had done a great job putting a varied academic programme together for all four days, spanning from critical ethnographic sociolinguistics to social media, which also comprised a social programme with e.g. a guided city tour of multilingual Barcelona and a conference dinner at El Born Cultural and Memorial Centre. The Organising Committee had thus done their utmost to challenge participants’ academic interests as well as give them

glimpses of Barcelona's culture, architecture, history, cuisine, the Catalan language situation and the city's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Plenaries, workshops and presentations

Each day started with a thematic plenary lecture followed by a workshop focusing on aspects of the plenary topic and two parallel sessions with paper presentations (except for Day 4). See programme and Book of Abstracts on <https://sss8barcelona.wordpress.com/programme/> for further details. Four diverse, well presented, challenging, theoretically substantial and inspiring keynote lectures were delivered by well-known scholars, who are senior sociolinguists, and thus captured and gave participants insight in the breadth, multifaceted and cross-disciplinary nature of sociolinguistics.

Opening the SSS8 event with the distinguished researcher Monica Heller from University of Toronto in Canada, who spoke about "*Language and Inequality in the Contemporary World*", F. Xavier Vila from University of Barcelona opened the field the next day by giving a keynote entitled "*Agency in Language Policy Revisited*". From critical perspectives on language policy, management and planning, the third day focused in on the New Speaker theme when Joan Pujolar from the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), who is Vice Chair of the EU COST Action 1306 on New Speakers in a Multilingual Europe, delivered his theoretically substantial keynote entitled "*New Speakers: Languages and Lifestyles in Late Modernity*". By going from historical overviews, critical approaches to language and social difference, unequal access to multilingualism and issues related to new speakers of some of Europe's regional minority or minoritized languages, day four took a totally different turn by offering insight in a relatively new research trend within sociolinguistics which is the study of multilingualism in social media, Twitter in particular. Robert Lawson from Birmingham City University gave an excellent and illuminating plenary talk with the comprehensive title "*Big data, big problems: Investigating language use on Twitter*". In his lecture, which contained new coinages like 'mansplaining' and 'manspreading', Lawson argued that such word formations tell us quite a lot about contemporary gender ideologies in online spaces. His talk was followed by a workshop on Social Media, Discourse Analysis and Social Identity.

The parallel sessions that came after the thematic workshops on day 1, 2 and 3 were much broader in scope than I had anticipated, and so was both quality of papers and presentation skills. However, I never stopped being amazed, positively surprised, but also occasionally puzzled, by the wide range of research topics that PhD students had chosen to pursue. As the purpose of this short report is neither to give a comprehensive account nor to cover all the varied presentations I attended, my aim is simply to give a brief account of my impressions, draw attention to my main areas of interest and to give short glimpses of highlights from SSS8 as experienced by a second year PhD student at Heriot-Watt University, who paid particular attention to the studies of new speakers of minority or minoritized languages as well as ethnographies oriented towards social change. Having started on this interesting PhD journey nearly a quarter of a century after finishing my first master's degree in language studies, I couldn't help taking on a practitioner's perspective by on and off distancing myself from academia and thus – during presentations – reflecting on and internally questioning for whom the different examples of knowledge production were interesting, relevant and beneficial, who the end users are, and to what extent these projects were pointing towards identification and directions for social change. Although this point of departure, viewpoint or

stakeholder aspect was never explicitly stated by any presenter, was not a requirement or perhaps not an issue of concern for some of the researchers, my answers to these questions were sometimes clear and in other instances rather blurred. Irrespective of research position and interests, participants at SSS8 were given plenty of input for reflection.

From an academic standpoint, the overall picture I drew in my mind of the contents of the 4-day Training School was one that I will characterize as a vivid mosaic of high engagement, creativity, diversity, and structured dialogues on sociolinguistic themes. The vast majority of projects that were presented were undertaken in or linked to educational settings, mainly in urban contexts, a few focused on virtual settings, social media or other social spaces, whereas workplace settings and studies including migrants acquiring minority or lesser-used languages were scarce. From my perspective, this imbalance was a shortcoming in the programme. Especially when having in mind the social, cultural and linguistic changes ushered in by globalisation, including the increasing transnational population flows in Europe at present, I don't think that the implications of these changes figured or came to the forefront in the vast majority of presentations. In other words, I missed a more critical edge to the portrayals of today's multilingual realities. In contrast, these implications and consequent transformations in sociolinguistic research were emphasised in some of the keynote lectures.

The flip side of the overall picture described above was more of a practical nature comprising for example issues of poor acoustics, time-management, time for questions and feedback on presentations, matters that are open to improvement in future COST New Speakers Training Schools and Sociolinguistic Summer Schools.

Language and inequality in the contemporary world

This was the title of Monica Heller's keynote address and plenary lecture on the first day of the Sociolinguistic Summer School. Indeed an apt title as it captured the essence of the cross-disciplinary field of sociolinguistics and thus not only set the scene for the central focus of Day 1, which comprised aspects of critical ethnographic sociolinguistics and the New Speaker theme, but also served as an overarching introduction to the 4-day SSS8 event in Barcelona. Based on my own research interests, this keynote was the one I had looked most forward to and therefore for me it figured as the most important highlight of the training school. Professor Heller's lecture lived up to expectations, but on several occasions major points and statements got lost or were inaudible due to the fact that organisers had not thought it necessary to equip speakers with a microphone in the room where the plenary sessions took place. That – as experienced from my perspective – was a major drawback, which unfortunately also applied to Joan Pujolar and Xavier Vila's plenary lectures.

Monica Heller started out by stating that she had put her presentation together with the purpose of starting a conversation with early careers researchers in which she wanted to discuss *what sociolinguistics is for*. She underlined that sociolinguistics is not a peripheral concern, but one that has much to say about how inequalities have emerged on the terrain of social difference. In that sense, language is to be seen as a terrain for struggles over power. In answering what sociolinguistics is for, she gave the following three threads that she elaborated on: 1) the making of social difference in the service of social inequality; 2) the construction of legitimating discourses; and 3) linguistic practice as social action in making, modifying and contesting possible worlds. In other words, her message was that

sociolinguistics can help identify alternative discourses, narratives and practices as well as contribute to directions for social change. From these contemporary social change oriented points, Heller took the audience a step back in time on a quick and selective tour through the history of sociolinguistics, mainly focusing on the fact that sociolinguistics has its origins in concern with social justice in the 1960s. From covering issues of nation-building, decolonization, revitalisation, neo-liberalism and problems of unequal access to the resources and institutions of the state on the terrain of linguistic variation, she outlined different critiques in relation to structuration and linguistic authority and legitimacy, stating that sociolinguistics is inevitably political. In conclusion she asked the question of who we as researchers are in this constellation of stakeholders? The point, according to Heller, is to stay engaged in conversations, to engage in universal issues of meaning-making, and to understand who our interlocutors are.

After the first keynote, in which Heller managed to cover several decades of sociolinguistics while at the same time raising questions about the challenges of language and inequality in the contemporary world, a workshop followed with three short presentations demonstrating aspects of critical sociolinguistic ethnography. The rest of the afternoon was divided into two parallel strands of presentations of which the first mainly focused on the theme of new speakers. In addition to touching upon presentations dealing with New Speakers of lesser-used or minoritized languages in the next section, I'll give a brief and reflective account of my own presentation focusing on migrants' language learning and employment experiences in the Faroe Islands.

New Speakers

As defined by Joan Pujolar in his keynote address, "New speakers is a very generic category. It is primarily used to name people who use socially a language that is not their native one (or one of their native ones). So it can include people learning their "heritage" language, or a heritage language of the region in which they live. It can also include immigrants or refugees (mostly recent ones) adopting the local language. It can also involve anyone having experienced some kind of social, professional or geographical mobility with linguistic implications".

On the first day of the SSS8, the new speaker theme was well represented with presentations of projects covering Faroese, the Flemish sign language community, Galician, Irish and the multilingual Bolzano-Bozen-Bulsan province in Northern Italy, comprising issues of identities, authenticity, trajectories and spaces for language socialisation. On consecutive days, Catalan, Welsh and Breton were added to the list. In terms of covering the three different multilingual strands that the **New Speakers Network** collaborates on, which are regional minorities, immigrants and transnational workers (Memorandum of Understanding COST Action IS1306, 2013:3), the first category was indeed the one that was best represented. This was for example demonstrated via interesting presentations on Irish, Gaelic, Galician and Catalan. Fascinated and inspired by the dynamics, interest and engagement that I observed among young researchers doing sociolinguistic studies on aspects of these minority languages, I naturally drew some comparisons to my own research context and wondered why the sociolinguistic landscape of the Faroe Islands, which in the wake of globalisation is undergoing drastic changes, is so under researched. With my own study on the sociolinguistics of new speakers of Faroese with migrant backgrounds, which includes

emphasis on the implications of underemployment, I hope to contribute to local discussions, create awareness of social inequalities and throw light on aspects of the changing sociolinguistic landscape in the Faroes. However, many more studies need to be undertaken within this specific context in order to get a fuller picture of the transformations taking place within this sociolinguistic landscape.

While on the one hand reflecting on lack of sociolinguistic research in the Faroes, and on the other being amazed and inspired by the diversity of research within this academic field in other European regions and indigenous minority language contexts, I was happy to receive the news that the Faroese sign language gained official status in the Faroes on the 5th of July 2017. This was an important milestone in Faroese linguistic history, linked to minority language rights, equality and social justice, all topics that came to the fore in Monica Heller's keynote address.

In my presentation entitled "*Language Learning and Employment Experiences: Insights from a Small Island Community*", I focused on initial findings from my study on language and migration in the Faroes, which is linked to a trend in transnational migration resulting from the transformation of the global political economy over the last few decades and the emergence of a new economic order. I presented extracts of data collected from employees at a cleaning business and from two fish processing plants. As pointed out by Heller about her experience when she did fieldwork in a factory back in the 1970s, "looking at language on the factory floor made no sense: the noise from the machines was so loud that most of the workers wore earplugs" (2011:50). The same applies to two of my research sites. However, as little is known about these migrant employees' educational backgrounds, language trajectories or professional experiences, I was motivated to find out and therefore chose these research sites. I got the opportunity to engage in dialogue with randomly chosen workers; these conversations took place in an office on the factory premises and/or in participants' home after working hours. Among those participants who have settled in the island community more recently, i.e. after year 2000, 13 out of 19 workers had tertiary educational qualifications, including diverse bachelor's and master's degrees. In addition to confirming that acquisition of Faroese is essential to migrants' prospects of accessing skilled employment in this context, where Faroese is the main language spoken by the vast majority of the population, Danish is a major barrier too. Findings furthermore give insight in the challenging processes of language learning for adults, of limited access to language resources and language classes, and what it means to become a new speaker of Faroese in a context where the former colonial language, Danish, still plays a major role, mainly through the written medium and mass media. Unskilled jobs may pay for the bills, but they offer no or very limited language learning opportunities.

In an attempt to gather supplementary data, and with the aim of jointly identifying directions for change, I am organising a local stakeholder event in August 2017 in collaboration with local integration authorities, where my findings will be presented and discussed and new speakers themselves will draw attention to their experiences. The aim of this event is to bring together migrants, researchers, policymakers, social partners and other stakeholders in order to discuss pathways for better inclusion in society and access to skilled jobs. Main focus will be on migrants' experiences, challenges and opportunities regarding language learning and labour market access. More information is available on the following link:

<http://nvl.org/content/Language-Inclusion-and-Labour-Markets>

I have to add that one of the questions I was asked after my presentation was: Why do people move to such a remote and small island community if they end up taking unskilled jobs? There is no simple answer to that as migrants' reasons for settling in the Faroes and other island communities are wide ranging, including reasons that weigh more than career issues. These include standard of living, pay, security and family matters. However, in trying to respond to this question briefly, I had to draw attention to the fact that underemployment among migrants, including implications such as de-skilling and lack of recognition of foreign qualifications, is not unique to this particular context, but unfortunately a common trend and challenge in most western societies (see e.g. Piller 2016 and Duchêne et al. 2013 for comparative accounts in other European contexts), including the European countries that SSS8 participants represent. With these realities in mind, and in order to focus on opportunities, I think researchers and their research findings have a role to play in relation to identifying directions for social change.

In conclusion, aspects of the new speaker theme figured in a number of other presentations, but it was a lens used by only a small number of the presenters. In addition to a heartrending presentation on fieldwork conducted in Brittany and Senegal on facets of mother tongue interdiction and its consequences for the languages involved, there were some excellent presentations on new speakers of Irish and Scottish Gaelic that I found particularly interesting, along with a very interesting presentation on 'new signers' of the Flemish sign language. However, the highlight capturing the essence of the generic category of 'New Speakers' was Joan Pujolar's comprehensive and theoretically well founded plenary lecture entitled "*New Speakers: Languages and Lifestyles in Late Modernity*". Deeply anchored in social theory of late modernity, Pujolar argued that "new speakers open up the possibility to envisage forms of linguistic agency and subjection consistent with late modern developments". He gave examples of positive developments in some minority language contexts, e.g. in the Basque Country and in Ireland. In addition to applying the new speaker lens to a wide range of contexts and linking these with concepts from social theory, with the aim of understanding developments in late modernity, he concluded that "Late modernity, with its political economies of neoliberal individualism and identities as projects of the self, repositions language as a component of lifestyle. As such, access to multilingualism is still unequally distributed and opens and closes different possibilities for different profiles of speakers. The experiences of new speakers reveal, in this context, how languages feature in these new processes of social positioning and lifestyle investments in different contexts, both in their commonalities and differences" (Book of abstracts).

References

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