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# Language, mobility and scale in South and Central Asia: a commentary

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**Abstract:** This article aims to present a synthesizing commentary on the collected articles in this special issue on language, transnationalism and globalization in South and Central Asian spaces. In doing so, it focuses on three main themes that the assembled articles speak to: the role of *mobility* in the varying ways in which transnationalism operates; the importance of scale in understanding contradictions and disjunctions in the way language intersects with global, national and local mobilities; and the need to deconstruct the prioritization of the trans-national over other levels of inter-spatial connection. I conclude, commending the collection, by suggesting that not only do we discover more here about language and transnationalism in these specifically Asian contexts, but also that, in focusing on one specifically non-Western set of spaces, we can learn, in our research on academically more well-trodden parts of the world, about our own ideologies and assumptions about language, about mobility and about global change.

**Keywords:** movement, mobilities, motilities, scale, transnational

## 1 Introduction

This very timely collection of articles sheds light on language, globalization and trans-locational connections in a part of the world that is underrepresented in the Western sociolinguistic literature. It brings together research from parts of Central and South Asia that experienced British colonial rule, other parts which emerged from the post-Soviet world, as well as, and very interestingly, work which examines how these two zones of Asia have been bridged (literally and conceptually) in times of geopolitical change. Language is a central component in these Asian stories, and we read here about how it is policed and managed, how its mixing is used in mediated performances of hybrid identities (in Lena Zipp's article), how it helps maintain connections across long distances

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(the role of English in maintaining and developing Ismaili transnationalism, in Brook Bolander's contribution), differentiate local communities, or negotiate/project delicate and differently stanced geopolitical relationships (official discourses towards the Eurasian Union by Russian and Kazakhstani politicians in Lara Ryazanova-Clarke's contribution and the construction of the Shanghai Spirit in Hasan Karrar's article; the development of a national language policy in India in Vasudha Bharadwaj's article), and how language practices at state borders demonstrate the importance of scale and power in the creation of local meaning (in the article by Till Mostowlansky). And it is worth making the point that while it is relatively easy to carry out research on transnationals from the comfortable, regulated, familiar Western armchair, many of the researchers in this special issue have conducted complex – practically, socially, and linguistically – fieldwork in South and Central Asia itself to make these articles possible.

But the collection does much more than this. The deeper we explore new sites, the more we learn about the old, and about how we have come to understand and theorize the old. We learn more about the specific and contingent contexts which shape and are shaped by local circumstances in these newly studied communities, of course, as well about as the salient parameters that transcend sites the world over. We also come to better see the assumptions we make, the things we take for granted and the dimensions we overlook in the more well-trodden zones of investigation. Such explorations into new sites do indeed “unsettle categories”, as Bolander and Mostowlansky put it here in the introduction. In this short discussion article, I pull out a number of themes that are foregrounded when considering globalization and language across the articles as a whole. I will focus here on three interconnected issues: firstly, understandings and applications of mobility, especially important in this collection, and a theme which impacts upon the remaining two, namely the importance of spaces in connection with “scales”; and a (somewhat problematic) over-foregrounding of the *transnational* scale in today's sociolinguistics.

## 2 Movement, mobilities and motilities

Over the past two decades, the theorization of mobility across the social sciences has undergone radical change, with a number of prominent scholars arguing that for too long sociology had theorized mobility “through the lens of place, rootedness, spatial order and belonging [...] conceptualized through the lens of

fixity as an ideal” (Cresswell 2006: 26, 28; cf. also; Sheller and Urry 2006: 208; Hall 2009: 575). Researchers in what has come to be known as the New Mobilities paradigm have argued that the mainstream social sciences had previously conceptualized society from a “sedentarist” perspective. Sedentarist approaches understand place as the “phenomenological starting point for geography”, as a “moral world, as an insurer of authentic existence and center of meaning for people [...] mobility is often the assumed threat to the rooted, moral, authentic existence of place” playing “second fiddle to the overriding concern with place” (Cresswell 2006: 30–31). Mobility, in contrast, from this sedentarist perspective

is seen as morally and ideologically suspect, a by-product of a world arranged through place and spatial order [...] a threat, a disorder in the system, a thing to control [...] as suspicious, as threatening and as a problem [...] as anachronistic [the spatial equivalent of anachronism, something that is in the wrong place, rather than at the wrong time – DB] [...] modern states have preoccupied themselves with the ordering and disciplining of mobile peoples. Think of the role of the outsider in modern life [...] the drifter, the shiftless, the refugee and the asylum seeker have been inscribed with immoral intent [...] These have all been portrayed as figures of mobile threat in need of straightening out and discipline. (Cresswell 2006: 26, 55).

“Nomads and others”, Kabachnik (2010: 95, 102–103) argues, “without a fixed place are particularly terrifying and disruptive [...] nomads – be they capitalists, refugees or migrant workers – threaten the stability of places by crossing borders and disrupt the normative order”. Such discourses have been especially prominent in the public arena in recent times, as hundreds of thousands of people have fled conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and other war zones and headed towards Europe in search of a less disrupted life.

Just as mobility has been seen from the perspective of place (and thereby as disruptive) in some quarters, another plank of the new mobilities paradigm seeks similarly to avoid the temptation either to “fetishize” the mobile, or to see mobility as “unremittingly positive”. This “nomadism” that many new mobilities scholars criticize “puts mobility first, has little time for various notions of attachment to place and revels in notions of flow, flux and dynamism. Place is portrayed as stuck in the past, overly confining and possibly reactionary” (Cresswell 2006: 25–26). This mobile-is-all approach has been criticized on a number of fronts.

Firstly, it has been criticized as presenting a decontextualized mobility, failing to take into consideration who is mobile (and who is not), who has the resources to be mobile (and who does not), who is moving out of free will (and who is not), and so on. Cresswell (2006: 53–54), for example, has suggested that “the post-modern nomad is a remarkably unsocial being – unmarked by the traces of class,

gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and geography [...] little attention has been paid to the historical conditions that have produced specific forms of movement". Nomadism, it has also been suggested, runs the risk of "romanticis[ing] the lives and transgressive movements of subjects such as the nomad or migrant [...] diverting our attention away from the task of identifying the complex politics underpinning the production and regulation of mobilities" (Merriman 2012: 5). Secondly, Kabachnik (2010: 95) argues that "by critiquing one perspective of place and then ignoring place altogether, a nomadic metaphysics is throwing the baby out with the bathwater". The new mobilities paradigm has therefore argued for a recognition of the interconnectedness of "moorings" and "mobilities", appreciating the centrality of mobility in social life, but recognizing that "all mobilities entail specific often highly embedded and immobile infrastructures" (Sheller and Urry 2006: 210). Furthermore, in recognizing that "the suggestion of free and equal mobility is [...] a deception, since we don't all have the same access to the road" (Wolff 1993: 253), it takes seriously the complex ways in which mobility is unevenly distributed (see Britain 2016 for a general discussion of sedentarism and nomadism in sociolinguistic dialectology). Refreshingly, therefore, many of the articles in this collection that deal explicitly with mobility are as interested in the historical contexts and complexities of the mobilities affecting the communities they are researching as they are in the "mixed" communities that may result from them – the articles by Brook Bolander and Lena Zipp are exemplary in this regard. Zipp's, for example, carefully places BBC Asian Network radio show host Alpa Pandya's transnational biography in the context of Gujarati diasporic movements, the British Gujarati community and the local minority media scene.

While I would not want to argue that we can straightforwardly distinguish between mobility in social as opposed to geographical space, Kaufmann's (2002) concept of motility, as deployed by Brook Bolander in her contribution, encapsulates the factors that shape our *potential* for movement, and seems to function similarly to the new mobilities paradigm's rejection of nomadism and its embracing of the social differentiation of mobility. Absolutely correctly in my view, she reminds us of Dahinden's (2009) criticism of work on transnationalism which ignores the non-migrants who stayed behind in favor of the migrant. Here, the less mobile provide a necessary mooring back in the sites of origin, and imbue the mobility of those who have left with contextually relevant social meaning. Indeed, without understanding these moorings and their relationship to those who left, the *trans-* in transnational is essentially meaningless or vacant. It is especially clear in this contribution how considering the Ismailis who have left for education, for example, as transnationals rather than migrants is motivated and justified – it is clear here how and why

“transnational” as a concept buys us something, and is more than “just” migrant with an academically fashionable prefix.

The intimate interweaving of Ismaili mobilities and moorings with the English language provides a vivid example of how English comes to be circulated, valued and reinforced. The new mobilities literature talks of the ways society is so heavily reliant not only on human mobility, but also on the mobility of goods, capital, ideas, even waste.<sup>1</sup> We could productively add language to this list of circulating utilities, and Bolander’s presentation of the role of English in understanding Ismaili transnationalism is an especially insightful case-study. English is being circulated in this case not only by the departure and return of those who sought education and training, by the edicts of the Ismaili constitution and the movement’s educational policies, but also through the electronically mediated *farmans*, and even through the visits of the Aga Khan himself. Kaufmann’s work more generally (e.g. 2002) encourages us to recognize mobility potential as a form of “capital” that is unevenly distributed, while urging against the overhyping of globally exploding mobility. There are a good number of other voices in the mobilities paradigm who refuse to join the bandwagon of the homogenizing claims that “the world is substantially more mobile than ever before” (e.g. Zlotnik 1999; Pooley et al. 2005; Urry 2007; Piller 2014; Czaika and De Haas 2014).

Till Mostowlansky, in his article on the Afghan-Tajik border, refers to Tsing’s (2005: 5) discomfort with the apparent “smoothness” of the flows associated with globalization. Her concept of friction, “awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (2005: 4), is a particularly useful one to remind us of the inequality inherent in global movements, and it problematizes nomadist tendencies to see but flux and flow. This particular border is an especially fascinating contact zone,<sup>2</sup> and the article articulately makes the point that bridges joining two sides of a frontier provide the potential for contact without obliging it. We learn that physical frontiers, once bridged, often leave social and attitudinal borders behind (see also Britain 2014), and we learn how, in considering the

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, it is only when these interconnecting mobilities break down that we begin to notice them (see Cresswell and Martin 2012). One well-discussed example of such a breakdown is the consequences, for air travel and beyond, of the ashcloud from Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull volcano in 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Linguists have a long tradition of using “contact” in this neutral way to examine the setting where two or more varieties – “languages” or “dialects” or “idiolects” – become co-present for whatever reason. The term, as Mostowlansky mentions, avoids evaluative comment on the linguistic varieties involved in the contact.

different ideological stances of various stakeholders, flows across this newly opened border are nevertheless contested and evaluated in numerous, incongruent ways.

A sensitivity to matters of social and historical differentiation in the context of transnationalism is also salient in Lara Ryazanova-Clarke's article, in which we see how economic prerogatives are discursively positioned in contrasting ways in elite political discourses by the former colonial power, dreaming of the return of an apparently more successful imperial past, and by the former colonized, wishing to steer economic goals that enhance local nationalism, a nationalism that rejects a return to that past. These carefully crafted discourses, of course, hide much of the historical complexity in the relationships between these countries at a more local and personal level, complexities which have become sadly only too evident if we consider recent events in Ukraine. Hasan Karrar's article, similarly, examines the linguistic traces in China's discursive construction of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Drawing upon Massey's idea that global spaces are illustrative of how the world is constantly "being made", he points to the way that a lexis of cooperation, neighborliness and mutual respect, largely shaped by the Chinese partners in the SCO, represents an imaginative geography – one representing Chinese ideological stances – expressing *hopes* for a future regional space in the face of complex geopolitical realities.

### 3 Scale

We have recentered mobility away from place, but refused to allow social life to be entirely decoupled from meaningful moorings, and we have recognized the potential for mobility and the importance of recognizing constraints on it. Some constraints on mobility are imposed by nation states and/or institutions – e.g., does one have the *right* to move? Others are strongly tied up in individuals' place in the economic marketplace, and the resources that their position in the market affords them. Others still are more psychological, personal, and individual. These, for me, are fundamental qualities that we need to understand and bring to our discussions of the effects of mobility. They are, if we need to use a trans- prefix, "transscalar". They can help us understand mobilities at different scales – local, regional, global, whatever. Scale is intimately tied to conceptualizations of space, how areas are shaped by both human and institutional intervention and how they are managed and imagined. The focus on South and Central Asian spaces is one that is especially fruitful to demonstrate what Brook Bolander and Till Mostowlansky in their introduction call "process

geographies” (Van Schendel 2002: 664), supporting Pred’s (1984: 282) earlier idea that spatiality is always in a state of “becoming”. For me, the collection of articles here successfully embraces this multitude of scales, and a number of the contributions show how differential constraints at different scales produce complex, sometimes problematic outcomes.

Vasudha Bharadwaj’s article on postcolonial India is a wonderful historical account of the debates which shaped English’s ambiguous semi-official status as a national language. Such debates have surely also been pursued in other nations that emerged from British colonial rule during the twentieth century, no doubt often in circumstances of equal complexity, and it is to be hoped that this article encourages others to present such sensitive accounts for other nations. Scale is especially important, it seems to me, in understanding the complexities of the debate. At the national level, there were the (elite) voices stressing the need for one country-wide language as part of a nationalist discourse reacting to colonialism. At the regional and local levels, complex relationships between the linguistic, the political and the administrative problematized these nationalist discourses. The fate of English has ultimately partly been tied to the fate of Hindi, and the relationship of both, at the more local and regional level to the use of local languages.

Returning to Mostowlansky’s contribution, scale here too is important in understanding the complex relationships at the Afghan-Tajik border. Locally, the crossing is interpreted in the context of both people’s everyday experiences of contact (or the lack of it) with those on the other side as well as the ideologies they have absorbed that shape their understandings of those contacts. At the national level, the bridge is discursively crafted as a success of the state, and a driver of future prosperity. At a supranational level, the bridge is presented as a symbol of hope, progress and spiritual prosperity. Cutting across all of this is the complex language situation, which, like in so many colonized parts of the world, does not respect national borders, but which is undoubtedly shaped ideologically by the consequences of them. Mostowlansky’s article reinforces how, bringing these different scales together, and in the context of regional multilingualism, a bridge, a symbol of apparent connection, can be ideologically constructed in multiple often conflicting, often problematic ways.

## 4 Trans-what? Decentering the transnational

We should be careful – as Mostowlansky’s article makes clear – not to normalize or prioritize some scales over others. I find such normalization

present and problematic in some sociolinguistic work on transnationalism and transnationals, however. Why is the *transnational* scale such an important one? Vasudha Bharadwaj's article tellingly problematizes the scale of the nation-state by highlighting how a range of differently scaled nationalisms and regionalisms collided as India's language policy was being formulated. Similarly, Russia and Kazakhstan's differential stances towards the Eurasian Union, as Lara Ryazanova-Clarke makes clear, are partly understandable only in the context of Kazakhstan's once "sub"-national status within the former Soviet Union.

Obviously a particular kind of mobility constraint comes to mind when one thinks of movement between nations – legal constraints concerning access rights are perhaps especially stereotypical and prominent constraints on transnational movement, but even these are variable, contingent, changing from place to place, time to time. Transnational movement is not new, and it would be dangerous to argue that it is considerably greater now than it has ever been. It might be more salient these days as a result of the many mediated images and discourses that we are bombarded with, but we must recognize that just because we are more aware of something does not mean it is new or on a scale we have never seen before. Yet "trans-" at this scale, in the sociolinguistic literature, has received considerably more attention than any other – for example, in some applied sociolinguistic research on the diffusion of English, in work on the linguistic ramifications of "superdiversity", in work on the "multiethnolects" spoken in some northern European capitals, etc.

Merriman (2012: 5) argues that "uncritical celebrations of the incessant movements constituting the world are said to be in danger of diverting our attention away from the task of identifying the complex politics underpinning the production and regulation of mobilities". Others, such as Cresswell (2006: 54; see also; Makoni 2012), have complained that the particular type of nomadism that fetishizes the international migrant is not infrequently "raced", repeating "centuries of Western romanticization of the non-Western other [...] it is a thoroughly Orientalist discourse investing the [...] non-sedentary population with desire and romance [...] its advocates often overlook the colonial power relations that produced such images".

I see this celebration and romanticization as also implicit in arguments that present international migrants as shapers of an especially "creative" and sophisticated cultural hybridity. But if one looks at this on more than one scale, the concept loses its power. We are all, in a sense, cultural hybrids, we all use linguistic resources picked up from both our roots and our routes to construct and adapt our personal identities as we interact. Why is this deemed to be so special or so applauded among transnationals? We must be careful (as I have



argued elsewhere – Britain 2016) not to fetishize the international migrant and not to ignore the more mundane forms of mobility that are engaged in much more intensively and much more universally. In this context, Lena Zipp’s article presents a case study of what happens when transnationalism meets mediation. For me, the hybrid performance of the radio presenter tells us more about ongoing developments in the media than it does about the emergence of hybrid identities. We all negotiate identities in the light of our past and present cultural experiences, and I see no particular additional theoretical purchase provided by the fact that for this presenter some of those cultural experiences are not British (or English, or South-Eastern English, or London) ones. What for me is especially salient in the context outlined in Zipp’s article – although she does not specifically dwell on this – is the ways that radio (in this case) more and more often sanctions such performances, recognizing that in code-switching between Gujarati and English, these code-switched enactments demonstrate a shared practice with and thereby meet the needs and wishes of the particular targeted audience of the show. This is not new theoretically – Bell (1984) famously discussed this in his work on audience design; it is not new media behavior – there has been a recognizable shift in the past decades in the UK media, for example, away from minority elite accents to more popular ones; and it does not depend on transnationalism – linguistic accommodation and convergence at many different scales are not only well-attested in the theoretical literature, but are also well-established tropes of language use – but this is nevertheless an instructive case-study of the coming together of language, media and transnationalism, both methodologically – in not only examining data from the radio show itself, but also reporting the DJ’s own metalinguistic discourses – and in terms of its careful demonstration, in making the case for cultural hybridity, of the individual and contextualized transnational biography of this particularly influential personality.

## 5 Conclusion

This collection embraces a diverse range of themes, of language complexes, of trans-local, -regional and -national connections, using a broad palette of distinct methods. It also successfully brings together scholars from a range of disciplines – anthropology, sociolinguistics, discourse studies, political economy and history, and a range of academic contexts and traditions. Too rarely is such a mix of scholars in a position to place the role of language center stage in this way. We are taken on a language sociological tour of South

and Central Asia – from the language policies of India, to discourses of collaboration and partnership in China, Russia and the Central Asian states, to a popular British Gujarati radio DJ in London, to the array of linguistic ties that bind together the global Ismaili community, to the fissured complex of official and lay discourses at the Tajik-Afghan border. Each article brings a very different but complementary contribution to the general whole. What I have attempted here, from the perspective of someone unfamiliar with these sites, is to identify what I see to be the common threads of a narrative of language and globalization in these articles – the centrality of a nuanced, socially sensitive conceptualization of mobility, the importance of scale in understanding discursive fracture or coherence, as well as an awareness of the problematic centrality of the nation-state in our discussions of global mobility. Together, these articles not only provide innovative perspectives on this underexplored area, they also, I have argued, provide valuable insights about the interface of language, mobility and scale well beyond.

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