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# Metapragmatics of mobility

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ABSTRACT

This introduction presents a framework for analyzing the semiotic dimensions of mobility. Drawing upon the notion of pathway (Wortham & Reyes 2015), it examines how mobility is facilitated by semiotic processes that link linguistic emblems with speaker images across time and space (Agha 2007). It focuses on the circulation of discursive forms, facilitated by media technologies and complex patterns of transnational interaction, which ascribe identities to people on the move and root such identities within hierarchical structures of the market on local, national, and transnational scales. Looking at how interdiscursive networks intersect with people's experience of mobility and the way they position themselves in social space, this article problematizes the divide between 'micro' and 'macro' approaches, offering a historically grounded approach to operations of power that permeate both metapragmatic discourse and experiences of mobility. (Mobility, metapragmatics, mediatization, interdiscursivity)*

Mobility has become a highly prominent topic for sociolinguistics. A number of studies have explored various dimensions of the mobility of people across national and ethnolinguistic boundaries, a process facilitated by globalization. These include studies of migration (Collins, Slembrouck, & Baynham 2009), transnationalism (De Fina & Perrino 2013), diaspora (Eisenlohr 2006), displacement (Baynham & De Fina 2005), and tourism (Heller, Jaworski, & Thurlow 2014). Inspired by the linguistic conditions and consequences that both facilitate and constrain such cross-border flows of people, sociolinguistics is moving beyond the traditional domain of the nation-state to explore the complex aspects of language use in social contexts that arise in situations of mobility (Creese & Blackledge 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011).

This special issue, *Metapragmatics of Mobility*, contributes to this body of work by drawing our attention to the semiotic dimensions of mobility. Building upon work that conceptualizes mobility as the movement not just of people, but also of texts, discourses, and ideologies about people (Appadurai 1996), this issue argues that tracing the pathways of metapragmatic discourse across time and space can add new insights for the cultural and political conditions of mobility (Wortham & Reyes 2015). It thus offers multiple case studies in which the circulation of

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mediatized images through interdiscursive networks intersects with people's experience of mobility and the way they position themselves in social space.

Our approach highlights both senses of the term *metapragmatics of mobility*. The first sense is how mobility always has a metapragmatic dimension, as it is facilitated by semiotic processes that link linguistic emblems with speaker images (Agha 2007). Various figures of mobile people, including immigrants (Vigouroux), refugees (Collins), returnees (Lo & Choi), and transnational professionals (Park) are constantly evaluated and positioned in local contexts through metapragmatic discourse, and it is through this process that their mobile status is understood and interpreted, and situated within hierarchies of power.

The second sense is how the study of metapragmatic discourse should consider mobility, in terms of the pathways and interdiscursive networks through which language ideologies and speaker images move (Wortham & Reyes 2015). Circulation of metapragmatic discourse takes place through interlinked flows of mediatized representations of significant time-depth (Vigouroux), across multiple sociolinguistic scales, figures, and discourses (Collins; Park), and is subject to constant ideological negotiation (Chun; Lo & Choi). Tracing these circuits, which often converge with itineraries of mobile populations, thus becomes necessary for a deeper understanding of metapragmatic processes.

Through this dual perspective, it is our goal to develop a more robust theoretical grounding for connecting research on metapragmatics and the study of mobility. The five articles in this issue investigate how circulation of discursive forms, facilitated by media technologies and complex patterns of transnational interaction, transforms established notions of personhood and space, thereby ascribing identities to people on the move, and rooting such identities within hierarchical structures of the market on local, national, and transnational scales. One central focus here is how aspects of social reality are packaged and formulated in circulable forms of discourse (Johnson & Ensslin 2007), aided by the process of mediatization—'institutional practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditization' (Agha 2011:163)—and enregistered models of personhood (Agha 2005, 2007; Wortham, Mortimer, & Allard 2009; Wortham 2011) that get linked to different times and spaces (Dick 2010).

Several of the articles highlight the mobility of figures and registers across scales, and how their pathways can be brought into being, interrupted, or erased. Vigouroux, for example, takes a historical perspective on the question of how Africans became constructed as incompetent speakers of French. Tracing the intersection of racial and linguistic ideologies over time, she looks at the ways that imaginations of the French spoken by Africans moved across texts including comic books, military course books, and advertising in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her analysis subtly unpacks the erasure of such trajectories rooted in the history of colonialism as such registers come to be naturalized through their inscription in an ahistorical temporality.

The article by Park argues for the importance of interdiscursivity in understanding transnationalism. Drawing from fieldwork with Korean managers of



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multinational corporations in Singapore, Park examines how transmigrants make connections with past places, making sense of their career trajectories through a complex web of multiple and sometimes conflicting chronotopes. Park's work confounds simplistic readings of the managers' narratives, shedding light on the tension-filled transnational spaces that managers occupy—spaces that become apparent only by considering the range of figures, times, and spaces that managers bring to bear upon their experiences of mobility.

Collins' article examines the enregisterment of racialized and class-based difference in a South African school where a large number of students come from refugee and working-class families. He illustrates how normative and emergent register processes work across multiple scales. Connecting classroom interaction, teacher commentaries about language diversity, and efforts to remake the scope of multilingual registers, his analysis offers a compelling argument against the idea of a tidy micro/macro divide, demonstrating how race works as an analytic that links sociohistorical processes, language variation, and cultural categorizations.

Lastly, the articles by Chun and Lo & Choi look at the ways that digital media spaces afford new tensions and possibilities for the mobility of metapragmatics. Chun explores comments about the pronunciation of names of Korean entertainers in K-pop reaction videos on YouTube. While the global fandom of K-pop may seem to herald a new plurilingual norm in which linguistic hybridity blurs social or geographic boundaries, Chun's careful unpacking of how users construct certain pronunciations as hybrids and others as pure reveals how such practices may actually reinscribe, not dismantle, the idea of normative centers of distinct languages.

Lo & Choi's article looks at how discourses about 'good' and 'bad' migrants in South Korea involve the metapragmatic formulation of emblems and their accompanying figures. They analyze a cyber campaign in which skeptics attempted to prove that the hip-hop star Tablo was not the upstanding elite transnational he claimed to be, tracing how Tablo was aligned with discredited figures of mobility through reevaluation of indexes that normally point to the linguistic and cultural capital of privileged and highly educated migrants. Their analysis offers a powerful illustration of how metapragmatic discourse is a site of tension in South Korea, where geographical mobility is often appropriated as a strategy for class mobility.

As these articles demonstrate, refining our theoretical toolkit for linking metapragmatics and mobility allows us to develop a more historically grounded approach to operations of power that permeate both metapragmatic discourse and experiences of mobility. The propagation and persistence of racialized stereotypes feed on historically embedded networks of broadly circulating metapragmatic discourse (Collins; Park; Vigouroux); at the same time, spaces for contesting and transforming hegemonic understandings of the links between language, race, ethnicity, and social class also open up through digitally mediated pathways of discourse that connect speakers and audiences from across the world (Chun; Lo & Choi). In this way, this special issue problematizes a dichotomized view of metapragmatics and mobility (with the former understood as a matter of 'micro' and the latter of



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'macro') so that we can reach a better understanding of the multiple worlds that people on the move must navigate (Wortham 2012).

## NOTE

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