

Review of *Sociolinguistics and mobile communication* by Ana Deumert

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In the “Acknowledgements” to *Sociolinguistics and mobile communication*, Deumert comments that during the writing process, the text “developed a life of its own” and took her on a journey to places, both theoretical and virtual, which she had not anticipated (p. x). What makes her book such a pleasure to read is that it takes her audience on the same journey, now carefully planned and crafted to ensure maximum coherence, interest and accessibility.

The ‘terrain’ is the emerging field of mobile- (or computer-) mediated communication and the ‘guides’ are what Deumert refers to as the ‘ancestors’ of much contemporary intellectual thought: scholars such as Bakhtin, Jakobson, Goffman, Barthes and Derrida, whose research has influenced and shaped the study of language and communication over the past century, and more recently, the field of sociolinguistics. She argues that we do not need a fundamentally new theory of sociolinguistics (or anthropology, or sociology) to understand online practices; rather we should revisit these seminal texts and reread them through the lens of digital communication. In a very engaging and accessible style, this book reviews a range of key concepts and theories from the past and uses these to explore the nature of contemporary

mobile communication in terms of three central organising themes: *mobility*, *creativity*, and *inequality*.

The book’s central argument (and, I would argue, its most interesting theoretical contribution) is that *creativity* should be viewed as fundamental not only to digital language, but to language in general. Traditionally, linguists have argued for a view of language as an ordered, structured system governed by norms and conventions, and creativity as an inherently rule-governed process. Through her analysis of online texts (and with reference to Jakobson’s *poetic* function), Deumert makes a strong case for viewing all linguistic and semiotic creativity as open-ended and highly original. For example, she shows how the texting practices of young South African participants include unconventional spellings and localised initialisms, sometimes realised in ‘ornamental’, non-standard forms which emphasise the visuality of language. These creative and artful practices, she argues, allow digital writers to style particular online identities and index various stances and degrees of emotional intensity. She then extends this argument to traditional offline linguistic play, such as the poetry of the early twentieth century avant-garde Futurist movement, and argues

that speakers and writers both online and offline should be seen as *refashioning* and not just *reproducing* semiotic and linguistic signs. She quotes Derrida's observation that "signs are never closed, but can always be manipulated, twisted, changed" (p.171) and, drawing on Bauman's notion of *liquid modernity*, argues that *all* language is *liquid* i.e. immensely pliable, flexible and fluid (p. 144).

Each chapter introduces a set of theoretical lenses, which afford multiple perspectives on the complex phenomenon of mobile communication. Chapter One positions the book within the emerging field of media sociolinguistics, sets the frame for the book, and introduces the key theoretical interests and arguments (mobility, creativity and inequality). Chapter Two uses Goffman's notion of the *interaction order* to explore how digital communication facilitates the mobility of people, ideas and semiotic resources across time and space. It also raises some important ethical and methodological issues. Chapter Three explores the theme of inequality and refers to a range of literature which demonstrates how differential access – the outcome of unequal economic conditions – enables or constrains different kinds of online practices. For example, in Africa, where most users do not have access to fast bandwidth and large computer screens, online communication relies more heavily on text as opposed to the multimedia creations typical of youth in more affluent societies like the US. Chapter Four continues the theme of inequality and surveys global digital culture from the perspective of multilingualism. Here Deumert asks which languages are most visible online and concludes that, with the exception of a handful of powerful languages (topped predictably by English) mostly from

the global north (with the exception of Chinese); the vast majority of the world's languages remain invisible. One of the case studies in this chapter is a very interesting study of Wikipedia based on both published work as well as her own research. Her analysis of the isiXhosa wiki pages draws attention to the ways in which this site reproduces rather than challenges unequal global power relations and reinscribes the marginality of isiXhosa online. In this way, her book serves the important counter function of making isiXhosa and other African languages visible in this growing field.

Chapter Five returns to the theme of mobility (of texts and voices) and takes Bakhtin's idea of *dialogism* and Kristeva's notion of *intertextuality* as core theoretical concepts. Through an analysis of how YouTube videos are creatively remixed and reworked, she develops her argument that all signs are multivocal with multiple meanings. Once again, this chapter includes her own analysis of an online isiXhosa lesson on clicks and shows how material may be taken up and interpreted by audiences in unexpected ways. In this case, comments on the site indicate how some visitors interpret the lesson through a frame of Western imaginings of 'exotic' African beauty and sexual desire. Thus, she argues, meanings emerge dialogically and interactively, in ways often beyond the author's control; and, drawing on Derrida's notion of iterability, all signs are in fact resignifications (not merely repetitions) of earlier signs. Chapter Six expands on these ideas by exploring how users of social media take up and refashion different 'social voices' by inflecting and 'twisting' them in different ways. She uses Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* to explore how mobile communication is characterised by both *centripetal* (conventionalised patterns and forms) and *centrifugal* forces (artful,

hybrid forms and practices) to argue that “the fundamental heteroglossic nature of language” provides speakers with the multilingual resources essential to creativity (p. 121).

In Chapter Seven, Deumert arguably reaches the ‘high point’ of her journey. This is a fascinating account of ‘textpl@y as poetic language’. This chapter explores the enormous variability and innovation that occurs in online communication as users play with linguistic form, layout, typography and orthography. In this chapter, she develops her central argument (as outlined in the third paragraph above) on the centrality of creativity to the nature of language, both online and offline. Once again, this chapter includes reference to her own work on isiXhosa and through a comparison with published research, she makes the interesting argument that in Africa, where texting practices tend to be characterised by a high degree of multilingualism, mobile texts reveal a high level of abbreviations and shortenings for messages which are written in the former colonial languages but show considerably more standard spellings for writing in the local languages. According to her data, participants argue that the local languages need more ‘respect’ and that the extra care that it takes to write messages ‘in full’ indexes a level of ‘care’ and ‘seriousness’ which is more suitable for certain topics (such as declarations of serious love as opposed to flirting). They therefore reflect an identity rooted in local traditions, while English, by comparison, evokes a transgressive global post-modernity and allows for freedom and ‘linguistic whateverism’ (p. 138).

Chapter Eight shifts the focus from textual forms back to social practices again and takes up the primacy of the relational function of texting and its role in the lives of the users for creating a sense of connectedness, community

and online visibility. However, Deumert gives this topic a new take by using Barthes’s distinction between *plaisir* and *jouissance* to explore the notion of sociability. The former concept is glossed as referring to the comforting, cheering pleasure that strengthens social bonds and the latter to a quite different, unsettling enjoyment which derives from acts known to be inappropriate and offensive, but which nonetheless elicit laughter and mirth. In her analysis of several transgressive online sites, Deumert productively employs Bakhtin’s idea of the *carnavalesque* in a way which once again illustrates the value of the classic theories to our understanding of digitally mediated communication.

The final chapter draws together the different threads of the book and revisits what an analysis of mobile communication reveals about language in relation to the organising themes of mobility, creativity and inequality. She concludes that this perspective allows us to see that intertextuality, heteroglossia, performance and the poetic function are central to language and meaning making and that contemporary sociolinguistics should recognise more fully the central role of creativity and artful performance in everyday language practices.

The book covers an impressive range of scholarship, both recent work on computer mediated communication as well as more established foundational concepts and theories. In making her arguments, Deumert draws on an extensive review of published literature as well as her own research on South African texting styles and practices among speakers of isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English. In this respect, it is a significant contribution to the field as it reflects ‘southern’ experience and scholarship in a field dominated by research from the north. In sum, the book is theoretically

grounded, reflects a thorough and comprehensive reading of the field, and contributes a new, interesting and relevant theoretical perspective to the field.

The pleasure of reading was further heightened by the book's lucid and readable style. Theoretical concepts are carefully and accessibly explained with concrete illustrative examples. The content is organised into thematically coherent chapters which are well structured with helpful introductions and conclusions. It also includes a very useful index. I would suggest that this book is essential reading for every scholar of language

and communication, sociolinguistics and the media. It provides a very helpful and interesting overview of seminal concepts in the field and offers the reader a set of theoretically productive ideas to think about and analyse their own data and contexts.

REFERENCES

- Ana Deumert. 2014. *Sociolinguistics and mobile communication*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.