



Alastair Pennycook*

Toward the total semiotic fact

<https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2023-2023>

Abstract: This paper explores the quest for an account of the total linguistic or semiotic fact. Speech act theory, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and social semiotics have all attempted, in various ways and at various times, to find a way to describe as much as possible what is going on around any speech event. While this search for the total linguistic fact will always be a chimerical goal, this paper draws on the inspirational work of Jan Blommaert to suggest a framework for moving in this direction. The acronym SEMIOSIS points to the complexity of what is at play, comprising social relations, emotional and affective domains, multilingual practices, iterative activity, objects and assemblages, spatial repertoires, interactivity, and sensory relations. Looking at data from a small Bangladeshi-run store in Tokyo, the paper shows how bringing in this wider set of concerns allows a more comprehensive account of semiotic moments.

Keywords: assemblage; Blommaert; complexity; semiosis; total linguistic fact

1 Insisting on complexity

If one word could account for the diverse interests and insistencies of the late Jan Blommaert's remarkable body of work, it might arguably be "complexity." One of the outcomes of his background in linguistic anthropology was that throughout his work Blommaert insisted on the need to understand ethnographically how language works: discourse analysis needs ethnography (Blommaert 2005), i.e., we cannot understand texts without investigating their use and users; literacy needs ethnography (Blommaert 2008), i.e., literacy is a social and cultural practice that needs to be studied in the world; sociolinguistics needs ethnography (Blommaert 2010), i.e., rather than system, synchrony, and variation, we need to see how linguistic resources are mobilized; linguistic landscapes need ethnography (Blommaert 2013), i.e., to have anything useful to say about signs in place we have to understand their location, history, authors, and readers. This focus on ethnography was not so much a question of methodology as an argument that we need to understand complexity: "linguistic landscaping research can be useful in illuminating

*Corresponding author: Alastair Pennycook, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia; and University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway, E-mail: alastair.pennycook@uts.edu.au

and explaining the complex structures of superdiverse sociolinguistic systems” (2013: 14).

The study of language in society, Blommaert (2017: 47) notes, has “moved away from linear models towards complex models.” Alongside ethnographic explorations of complexity, Blommaert also proposed ways of thinking about the “multimodal total semiotic fact” (2015: 21), encompassing a wider set of signs than the linguistic, narrowly defined. Developing the work of his great mentor, Silverstein (1985), Blommaert urged us to consider the “total linguistic/semiotic fact” in relation to “cultural ideology” and “sociolinguistic stratification” (Blommaert 2017: 58). From this perspective, we have to account for the multiplicity of factors that come together around people and place: “These dense and complex objects are the ‘stuff’ of the study of language in society” (2017: 59). Building on these insights, this paper develops a framework for considering a wide array of semiotic relations through the acronym SEMIOSIS. While it is evident that we can never arrive at a full account of the total linguistic or semiotic fact, it is nonetheless important to consider carefully what is at stake.

2 The total linguistic fact

Silverstein’s (1985) interest in “the total linguistic fact” was a move to add a range of elements often left out in more formal and traditional linguistic analysis. A more adequate description of language use needed to account for the “unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualised to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (1985: 220). The focus therefore needed to be on the interactions among linguistic forms (including phonetics, morpho-syntax, and semantics), interactional activity (including the interactional work of Goffman and others), and ideology (including beliefs about language, its use and effects). We are not therefore just selecting linguistic forms but doing so in interaction and in relation to beliefs about how language will be perceived and what kinds of identity one might be projecting.

Others have added to this framework (or suggested that such ideas were already there), Wortham (2008), for example pointing to the importance of *domain* alongside the other three elements, to refer, following Agha (2007), to “the set of people who recognize the indexical link between a type of sign and the relevant ideology” (2008: 4). In other words, we need to take into account not just the form, use and ideology, but also the ways participants recognize or enregister them. Blommaert (2017: 47) noted that this move to capture “adequate contextualization” entailed a focus beyond linguistic signs in a narrower sense toward “semiotic, complex objects,” a wider understanding of the total semiotic fact. Expanding on Blommaert’s interest in

chronotopes – “the intrinsic blending of space and time in any event in the real world” (Blommaert 2017: 48) – Karimzad (2021: 26) makes a case for their inclusion in the *total sociolinguistic fact*, so that we can pay more attention to different levels of contexts that are relevant for any interaction and thus provide “more precise and coherent understandings of experience, memory, imagination, and ideology and their impact on situated practices.”

The trend toward a broader *semiotic landscape* (Eckert 2018) can be observed in a number of domains of sociolinguistics. The field of *linguistic landscapes*, for example, has expanded from an earlier focus on languages on signs in the public space to a broad understanding of the social semiotics of space, from signs as signage to signs as semiotics (Pennycook 2019), to include “images, photos, sounds (soundscapes), movements, music, smells (smellscapes), graffiti, clothes, food, buildings, history, as well as people who are immersed and absorbed in spaces” (Shohamy 2015: 153–154). While a lot of the focus on the *translinguistic* turn in sociolinguistics has been on its challenge to linguistic orthodoxies around bilingualism, codeswitching, and the ontology of named languages – the idea that “communication transcends individual languages” – a secondary focus has been on the ways that “communication transcends words and involves diverse semiotic resources and ecological affordances” (Canagarajah 2013: 6).

This broad multilingual, multimodal, and multisensorial focus (Zhu et al. 2017a) has been taken up through an interest in semiotic assemblages (Pennycook 2017) or entanglements (Pennycook 2020). An assemblage approach to language arguably suggests an ontological shift from a prior account of languages as systems, and a subsequent interest in languages as social practices, to a view of language as an emergent conjuncture of different components (Demuro and Gurney 2021; Pennycook 2024). People’s beliefs about language – always an important part of the original conception of the total linguistic fact – can also be seen in terms of *language ideological assemblages* (Kroskrity 2021), the ways in which social worlds, political and economic disparities, a desire to belong, and the remaking of intersectional identities are intertwined with language and how we think about language.

3 SEMIOSIS at a corner store

In line with this assemblage-oriented way of thinking, this paper reorients Hymes¹ (1974) SPEAKING framework (as another attempt to account for the total linguistic

1 Dell Hymes’ widely-attested history of sexual misconduct raises concerns about whether he should be “cancelled” (as some have put it), whether his work should be ignored, whether we should just carry on, or whether all references to his work should at least be footnoted (as here). While it is hard

fact) toward a broader understanding of SEMIOSIS. As part of his framework for the ethnography of speaking, which was to have a major influence on the ethnography of communication as developed by Saville-Troike (1982) among others, Hymes' acronym referred to the different components of an interaction: Setting/Scene (time, place, and physical surrounds, or context), Participants (speaker or audience), Ends (purposes, goals, and outcomes), Acts sequence (order of speech acts), Key (tone or manner), Instrumentalities (forms and styles of language used, including speaking, writing, or register), Norms (social conventions governing interactions), and Genre (the kind of speech act involved).

The SEMIOSIS framework is an extension to this way of thinking, made up of the following elements: social relations between the participants, with particular attention to questions of class, ethnicity, gender, race, and religion; emotion and affect, emphasizing the importance of affective domains; multilingual practices, drawing attention to metrolingualism, mobility, and space; iterative activity, locating language within an understanding of social practices; objects and assemblages, helping us see how social interactions are always part of a network of artefactual relations; spatial repertoires, addressing the semiotic resources available in a particular place; interactivity, looking at the ways people interact through posture, gesture, and language; and sensory relations, drawing attention to the social and semiotic roles of the senses (Table 1).

Table 1: The SEMIOSIS framework.

SEMIOSIS

Social relations	Social background in interaction
Emotion and affect	Affective domains
Multilingual practices	Metrolingualism and space
Iterative activity	Language as social practice
Objects and assemblages	Networks of artefactual relations
Spatial repertoires	Available semiotic resources
Interactivity	Posture, gesture, and interaction
Sensory relations	Social and semiotic role of senses

to ignore either his sociolinguistic work or his history of misconduct, it may also be important to ask a question beyond Hymes or not Hymes: What other people, from what other backgrounds, are we still not citing while having this discussion?

Corner stores are particularly productive sites for the study of complex social interactions (Zhu et al. 2017a, 2017b): commonly run as migrant small businesses (Panayiotopoulos 2010), they are key sites of everyday economic, intercultural, and linguistic exchange. Following the notion of *multiculturalism from below*, or *everyday multiculturalism* – understood as “a grounded approach to looking at the everyday practice and lived experience of diversity in specific situations and spaces of encounter” (Wise and Velayutham 2009: 3) – a focus on the role of small shops from a localized, ethnographic perspective draws attention to the ways in which multilingual cities operate at a local level. This brings together a focus on the sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert 2010), grassroots multilingualism (Han 2013), and an understanding of the interconnectedness of intercultural communication, economic transaction, and social interaction as “contemporary corner shop cosmopolitanism and everyday diversity unfold” (Karrabæk 2017: 469).

In the rest of this paper, I shall draw on various examples from the twelve-year (2010–2022) metrolingualism project (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015a) using linguistic ethnography (Copland and Creese 2015) for the study of language complexities in urban settings to illustrate the work that this framework can do. I will draw on data from the Bangladeshi-run store in *Isuramu Yokochō* (Islamic alley) in *Hyakunin-chō* in Shinjuku (Tokyo), where we have conducted a long-term research project (Pennycook and Otsuji 2019). People who shop there are both diverse (in terms of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds) and dispersed (traveling from different parts of Tokyo to stock up on food and various products). A large signboard displayed outside the shop states at the top in English “100 % Halal food” above the Japanese “香辛料専門店” (spice specialty shop). Pictures of Nepalese, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Indian, Pakistani, Ghanaian, and Nigerian flags, as well as images of various foods (fish and meat), spices, and phone cards are scattered round the sign, alongside the name of the shop written in Roman, Bangla, Hindi, and Burmese scripts. For reasons of space, this paper will focus particularly on one example (Excerpt 1), while drawing on others to develop certain aspects of the framework.

4 SEMIOSIS in situ

4.1 Social relations

Rather than “social background,” which often suggests a degree of fixity, *social relations* usefully highlight the relational aspects of social identity (cf. Agha 2007). People who shop here may be of South Asian background looking for familiar foods,

Muslims in search of Halal meat, people from the Maghreb in search of lentils and chickpeas, Uzbek or Nepali workers on recent work visas looking for cheap chicken, West Africans after particular kinds of fish, or Japanese customers who like to cook South Asian food. They have often traveled a long way in terms of their wider trajectories as well as having undertaken a long trek across Tokyo to stock up on supplies (it is quite common for people to arrive with an empty suitcase). Being of Bangladeshi or Pakistani or Nepalese background does not matter in itself so much as it matters in relational terms. Such identity markers matter in Tokyo (often along racial lines) but take on a different status in a shop where the staff are all of Bangladeshi background themselves.

These social relations – religion, class, ethnicity, gender, race – matter in these interactions. They also of course have linguistic implications (as discussed in *multilingual practices*), from the French used by C in Excerpt 1 (not addressed to the shop assistants with whom he interacts in English) to the Japanese used with other customers, or the struggle below among English, Japanese, Uzbek, and gesture. In the data discussed here (Excerpt 1), it is early evening during Ramadan, and two shop assistants (SA1, SA2) and the shop manager are taking turns to attend to customers. A short time before this excerpt, SA1 has been answering a regular customer's questions about SIM cards while simultaneously browsing his mobile phone to find the live stream match between Bangladesh and New Zealand at the 2017 International Cricket Council Champions Trophy in England and Wales, which he then proceeds to watch while serving customers (being from Bangladesh, with its postcolonial ties, matters).

In the particular example here (Excerpt 1) the customer (C) is of West African origin, with implications for the languages used and the items bought (he is trying to find the right kind of dried fish). As discussed further in the section on objects, and as observed elsewhere (Pennycook and Otsuji 2017), dried and frozen fish become an important focus in such stores as different people of different background seek out foods that at least partially fit their familiar cuisines. Not all customers are as comfortably at home as this one, however. In a different example from this data set (Pennycook and Otsuji 2022: 70), three young men of Uzbek background, who are not sure who runs this shop, ask among themselves (in Uzbek) “Bu qorachalar kim? Hintlar ekanu” (Who are these darker people? Seem like Indians). Their Japanese and English is limited but they point to an Uzbek 500 sōm banknote on the counter – both their presence and that of this note reflecting recent migratory trends and working visa changes in Japan – and explain (in Japanese) “Kore wa watashi tachi no (this is ours)” which is met with “Uzbekisutan desho (Uzbekistan, right?)” from the shop assistant.

4.2 Emotion and affect

Emotional (affective) relations comprise a broad domain, reflecting a need to readdress the ways sociolinguistics has drawn too heavily on the cognitive-rationalist dimensions of linguistic inquiry – the *intra-cranial* view of language in Joseph's (2018) terms – that have tended to make the literate mind in the head of the individual the assumed locus of language (Finnegan 2015). The dualist inheritance of sociolinguistic thought has led to the relegation of senses other than seeing and hearing (discussed further below in sensory relations), bodies (discussed below under interactivity), and affective elements of any interaction (Pennycook 2018a). Sociolinguistic research needs instead to recognize that “brains and bodies are in the same mind-enabling soup” (Damasio 2018: 240). This is to engage not only “the material world of stuff, objects, and things” but also the “immaterial world of affect, emotions, and feelings” (Thurlow 2016: 15).

The “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007; McElhinny 2010) and an understanding of relations between language and emotion (Wilce 2009) draw our attention to the importance of emotional life in any social interaction: “language does not merely encode or express our inner feelings but actively works to shape and transform our subjective experiences” (Park 2021: 28). There are of course linguistic manifestations of affect in Excerpt 1 – C's *je suis désolé* (I'm sorry) to his interlocutor – but it is the gestures, tone of voice, laughter, and fillers (*da da da da*) that also do a lot of the affective work here. There is a level of frustration that this long search for the right kind of dried fish is taking so long (Excerpt 1 is only a small part of a much longer interaction). The shop assistant puts one leg on the stool behind the counter and fiddles with the handle of the basket sitting on the counter between them. The quiet flipping back and forth of the handle of the basket is an important part of the interaction.

When the customer discovers the latest offering is not the right one (according to his interlocutor on the phone), his gentle laughter while explaining “not this one ... no not this one” (Excerpt 1, line 9) is a way of softening the frustration on both sides. All this matters, as Thurlow (2016: 23) notes, since attempts to engage a wider set of semiotic relations “remain very ‘textual’, with little attention to embodied, intuitive, affective ways of doing and knowing.” Any attempt to grasp the meanings of any interaction also needs to consider the feelings that underpin it, not so much in terms of overt statements of emotion but also in terms of the affective currents that run through nonverbal, embodied aspects of the interaction.

Excerpt 1: Buying fish

C: Customer; SA1: Shop assistant 1; SA2: Shop assistant 2; SA3: Shop assistant 3
 Bangla: **Bold**; English: Plain; French: *Italics*; unidentifiable: underlined (translation in brackets)

1. C: ah no. not this one. she said not this one

[C returns the fish]

[SA1 makes a phone call from his mobile phone on speaker mode to SA3]

2. SA1 to SA2: **oije boroda lon taile**. smoked fish **boroda den**. (give that big one in that case. give me the bigger smoked fish.) **oije boroda ano. boroda ano**. (Bring the big one. Bring the big one.)

3. C: *allo. OK*. [to the phone and keeps the line on hold]

[SA1's call was picked up by SA3]

4. SA3: hello::

SA1 [to the phone]: **ak case American loya ahen toh**. (bring one case of American)

5. SA3: **a::achha** (okay)

[SA1 finishes the phone conversation]

SA1 to C: maybe this one better not small fish.

[SA2 brings the dried smoked fish, SA1 point to the fish: pic 1]

6. C: [goes back to the phone] *ah? allo? il faut regarder ton portable. On dirait ça, c'est ce qu'il vient de me montrer là. attends je prends un photo. je vais t'envoyer*. don't worry. da da da da. (hello? you have to look at your phone. it seems like it, that's what he has just shown me. hang on I'll take a photo. I'll send it to you. don't worry da da da da da).

[C takes a photo of the smoked fish: pic 2]

7. C: [into phone: pic 3] *qu'est-ce qu'il a fait, hein? ... il faut regarder*. [unclear] *en haut*. (What did he do, eh? ... you have to look. [unclear] at the top)

[waiting for his partner's response]

8. C: *allo? c'est pas ça? ah. OK*. (Hello? It's not that? Oh, OK.)

[SA1 turns around and takes plastic bags from the wall behind him]

9. C: not this one [to SA1] [laughs] no not this one

10. SA1: [pointing behind customer] easy to [the rustling sounds from opening the plastic bag overlaps with the word here] dry fish.

[C looks behind]

11. C: [to SA2] No. not this one. [to phone] OK. *je suis désolé alors. désolé. bye*. (Ok. well then I'm sorry. sorry. bye)

[C finishes the phone call and removes the earphones: pic 4]

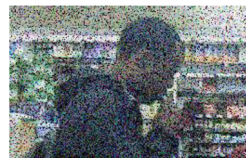
[SA1 continues packing three packs of skin-on frozen goat meat and semolina powder]



[pic 1]



[pic 2]



[pic 3]



[pic 4]

4.3 Multilingual practices

The focus on metrolingual practices (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015a) brings together an interest in urban multilingualism and space, a challenge to the static sociolinguistic emphasis on language in place. “Mobility is the great challenge: it is the dislocation of language and language events from the fixed position in time and space attributed to them by a more traditional linguistics and sociolinguistics” (Blommaert 2010: 21). Our task within a sociolinguistics of complexity is not to downplay the importance of linguistic resources but rather to understand how they are intertwined with a broader set of semiotic resources. Not surprisingly, given the social relations and mobilities already outlined, it is common in this store for a wide range of linguistic resources to be deployed. Customer C uses English to the shop assistant, a practice that is not particularly marked (in the example above with the Uzbek customers, the shop assistant uses English – “Hello brother. What do you want? Please tell me” – and then settles on Japanese) but nor is it necessarily the obvious choice. In response to a question about languages commonly used, the shop manager listed Bangla (as seen in Excerpt 1, the common working language of the shop), Urdu, English, Hindi, and Nepalese. This linguistic repertoire was further extended by a shop assistant – “Arabī mo chotto” (a bit of Arabic too) – using the Bangla word for Arabic and speaking in Japanese (a language missing from the inventory above).

Beyond this inventory of commonly used languages, customers bring their own linguistic resources (Uzbek being but one example among many). In the example here, it is the mobile phone that also brings in the use of French as the customer checks whether the fish is right: *il faut regarder ton portable. On dirait ça, c’est ce qu’il vient de me montrer là. attends je prends un photo. je vais t’envoyer* (you have to look at your phone. it seems like it, that’s what he has just shown me. hang on I’ll take a photo. I’ll send it to you). Mobile phones themselves enable an expanded and interlocking spatiotemporal dimension within the daily activities of shopping. For Zhu et al. (2017b), describing an interaction between a shop assistant, who is looking at her mobile phone, and a customer in a “Polish Shop” in London, this may be seen as two intersecting communicative zones, a “face-to-face communicative zone at the counter and the other digital communicative zone to which the mobile serves as a gateway” (p. 426). The focus here, however, is on the simultaneity of entangled activities, and the metrolingual implications of such practices.

The central interest is not in linguistic systems and how they may intersect (codeswitching), nor in an inventory of diversity, but in how different linguistic resources are mobilized as part of larger semiotic assemblages. Like the related *translinguistic* focus, linguistic boundaries can be considered to be “the result of ideological invention and sedimentation” that “do not guide communication in

everyday contexts.” Such communication is “not limited to ‘language’ insofar as interlocutors draw on a range of semiotic and spatial repertoires” (Lee and Dovchin 2020: 1). Despite some concerns over sociolinguistic *metronormativity* (May 2014) (a focus on language in the city at the expense of other contexts), our focus on metrolingual practices attempts to shed light on questions of language resources and mobility, rather than assuming that cities are the proper focus of sociolinguistics (Coulmas 2009). Such divides – the urban and the rural, sociolinguistics and dialectology – are, as May (2014) notes, unhelpful constructs of modernity. Metro-lingual practices take us beyond such framings of language and (non-)mobility.

4.4 Iterative activity

Iterativity points to the importance of the idea of *practices*. In search of the conditions that made an utterance effective, Austin (1962: 52) spoke of the “total speech situation” (a precursor to the total linguistic fact). There has never been, however, as Butler (1997: 3) points out, any easy way “to decide how best to delimit that totality.” Butler’s concern is with questions of time and iterative practice: the illocutionary act “performs its deed *at the moment* of the utterance, and yet to the extent that the moment is ritualized, it is never merely a single moment” (1997: 3, italics in original). It is this focus on ritualized behaviors – repeated social action that becomes practice – that is important here. This is to take a practice-based orientation to language seriously – not just as activity but as a sociological category. The practice turn (Schatzki 2001, 2002) in the social sciences emphasizes the ways in which social life is organized in terms of things we do: cooking practices, banking practices, recreation practices, religious practices, shopping practices, and so on.

To look at language practices in this way is to do more than emphasize the activity of doing language – also termed “*linguaging*” or “*translinguaging*” within the translinguistic movement (García and Wei 2014) – but rather to turn the tables on common ways of framing language use. While practice – a focus on “what people do” – has been seen as a foundational category in sociology and anthropology, in linguistics by contrast, “things have generally been the other way around, with systems (grammars, paradigms) generating processes (syntagms), rather than processes (practices) generating systems (institutions and objectified forms of knowledge)” (van Leeuwen 2008: 5). As this observation makes clear, the point in looking at language practices is to reverse the ways in which language studies have generally privileged language structure over social activity. Language, as Canagarajah (2007) observes, “does not exist as a system out there. It is constantly brought into being in each context of communication” (p. 91): Language cannot be understood “outside the realm of practice” (p. 94).

This shift from system to practice suggests an ontological shift in what language is (Demuro and Gurney 2021). To look at language as iterative activity – something we do repeatedly that forms into established practices – makes central the doing of language as a material part of social and cultural life rather than the idea of language as an abstract entity. As Bourdieu (1977) reminds us, practices are actions with a history, suggesting that when we think in terms of language practices, we need to account for not only time and space but also history and location. Considering Excerpt 1, shopping practices (using shopping lists, choosing items, paying for them at the counter and so on) are central. These are closely connected to related linguistic practices (writing a shopping list, looking at food labels, interactions between customers and shoppers). We have analyzed these processes elsewhere (Otsuji and Pennycook 2021; Pennycook and Otsuji 2022), suggesting that there is a multifaceted interplay among shopping and language practices, shopping lists and items bought, items on the shelves and language used while shopping. It is the way language is embedded in these repeated social practices that matters.

4.5 Objects and assemblages

Bangladeshi-run stores in different parts of the world may contain similar goods, from imported riverine fish (Sen 2016), spice, and rice to locally grown (and slightly different) vegetables (onions and bitter melon), as well as items such as phone and SIM cards (Pennycook and Otsuji 2017). The fondness for certain river fish unites people from parts of South Asia across nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. Such fish serve as *boundary objects* through their “ability to mediate across geographies, environments, culinary traditions, and histories” (Sen 2016: 71). Yet when these objects encounter the variable affordances of these different shops, they enter into new and momentary sets of relationships that we have termed *semiotic assemblages* (Pennycook 2017; Pennycook and Otsuji 2017).

This understanding of the vibrancy of matter, the importance of things (goat meat, phone and SIM cards), and the significance of place in the entanglement of physical, social, and economic processes enables us to appreciate the importance of things in social life and to see how they play a role within more complex assemblages (Tsing 2015). Bucholtz and Hall (2016: 186) stress the importance of understanding how the body is “imbricated in complex arrangements that include nonhuman as well as human participants, whether animals, epidemics, objects, or technologies.” The notion of assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts” (Bennett 2010: 23) allows an understanding of how different trajectories of people, semiotic resources, and objects meet at particular moments and places.

In the example in Excerpt 1, it matters that the customer (C) is looking to buy a particular type of dried fish (and other products). The excerpt starts when SA1 urges SA2 to bring another type of dried, smoked fish from the back of the shop (two other types of dried fish, one from Japan and the other from Africa, had already been rejected, so this time he tries smoked fish). SA1 shows him all the possible fish he could think of (including Japanese semi-dried *Sukimi tara*, a type of cod), and SA2 goes back and forth between the counter and the back corner where the dried fish is stocked. There are considerable resources – linguistic, artefactual, spatial, technological, personal – at play here as they try to find a suitable fish. Meanwhile, in a parallel space, C's interlocutor remains connected to the shop while C talks with the shop assistants, takes a photo, and waits for SA2 to bring the “Smoked fish **boroda den**” (bigger smoked fish). In this excerpt we see an early-evening assemblage of people (a customer of West African background, Bangladeshi shop assistants), objects (mobile phones, fish, plastic bags), an expanded spatial repertoire (see below) made possible by the use of the mobile phone, various sensory effects (sounds, smells), and the particular linguistic resources that are part of the simultaneity of these everyday activities.

4.6 Spatial repertoires

The notion of *repertoire* goes back to the early years of sociolinguistics, understood – in another attempt to think in terms of a totality – as “the totality of linguistic forms regularly employed in the course of socially significant interaction” (Gumperz 1964: 137). As the concept developed, a tension emerged as to whether it referred to the totality of forms available to a speech community (an idea that itself came under pressure) or to an individual, a distinction captured in Bernstein's (2000: 158) *reservoir* (community) and *repertoire* (individual). Sociolinguistics would generally follow the path of the individual (Pennycook 2018b), and while repertoires in recent studies have been understood socially and historically – the interest was in people's linguistic trajectories as they moved through life – they became tied to individual patterns of language use, each person bringing their own repertoire to the table: “Repertoires are individual, biographically organized complexes of resources, and they follow the rhythms of actual human lives” (Blommaert and Backus 2013: 15).

It seemed important in our studies of shops and markets, by contrast, to focus on particular social spaces in which interaction occurred, thus avoiding the reification of the speech community or the reduction to the individual and allowing an understanding of what may be available to people in this place at this time. The notion of spatial repertoires (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015a) points to the ways that available semiotic resources are connected to social space. A similar point can be

made about multilingual families: it is more useful to think in terms of a *translingual family repertoire* as the shared resources within a family than to look at individual family members as repositories of linguistic resources (Hiratsuka and Pennycook 2019). For Canagarajah (2018: 5), spatial repertoires are not brought “to the activity by the individual but assembled *in situ*, and in collaboration with others, in the manner of distributed practice.” They are both multi-semiotic and connected to the social relations – racialized and gendered bodies – among those present (Oostendorp 2021).

In the context of this shop, the notion of a spatial repertoire enables us to think in terms of the totality of linguistic or semiotic resources available, including the languages in use at any given time, the labels on the food, and a range of other semiotic resources. This makes it possible to move away from the methodological individualism that has crept into sociolinguistics once other categories, such as speech communities, appeared too unstable to maintain, while also allowing for a broader semiotics than the idea of a linguistic repertoire. The spatial repertoire of this shop is always changing – though some elements, such as signs, products, and the staff, remain relatively stable – as different customers, with different linguistic resources, in search of different products, interacting with others both within this space and across other spaces, come and go.

4.7 Interactivity

Interaction has always been central to many (though by no means all) approaches to sociolinguistics. From the point of view developed here, the focus is on multiple layers of interactivity, a perspective that echoes Goodwin’s (2000, 2013) interests in action, co-operation, co-construction, multimodality, gesture, and objects in collaborative communication. The interaction at the counter while buying goods is central here, though it is complicated by the use of the phone: in what is perhaps becoming a more common scenario in contemporary life, the customer and shopkeeper stand face to face while one of them is talking to somebody else. While Zhu et al. (2017b) note the simultaneous use of mobile phones within the *communicative zones* of service encounters in a Polish shop in London, they also note the linearity of the interactions, as customers line up to be served one by one at the counter. The social interactivity in this shop, by contrast, tends toward simultaneous activity. It is common for multiple interactions to be going on at the same time, with the shop assistants moving back and forth and customers (particularly non-Japanese customers) interacting with various assistants in different ways.

In Excerpt 1, SA1 interacts not only with SA3 in order to find appropriate fish for the customer, but also with SA2 on the phone. In the earlier scene referred to (watching the cricket match on his phone), he similarly interacts with the

live-streamed game while serving a customer (with some confusion since his focus is very much on the cricket) (Pennycook and Otsuji 2019). A great deal of interaction happens at levels other than the linguistic (narrowly understood), particularly the gestural or nonverbal. While a substantial literature has developed focusing on gesture and nonverbal communication more broadly (Kendon 2004), there is still a tendency in sociolinguistics to see the body as “secondary to language rather than as the *sine qua non* of language” (Bucholtz and Hall 2016: 174). The work that aspects of nonverbal communication do, however – communicating iconically, synchronizing with speech, indicating affect, and so on – is central to communicative interactivity.

Moving the handle back and forth on the basket, the postures of the two participants in pic 1, the shrug of resignation and apology that accompanies the “no not this one” when the customer realizes this is not the right kind of fish are all crucial parts of the action. Studies of multilingual interaction have been slow to take on board the multimodal nature of interaction (Kusters 2021: 184), yet it is crucial to understand “translingual practice as multimodal by attending to the role of e.g. speech, signs, mouthings, gestures, images, smells, and objects in interactions.” From this perspective, it is not just a question of including gesture within an account of multimodal interaction, but of seeing these as part of dynamic and interactive assemblages: once we start to appreciate the vibrancy of objects within larger entanglements of people and places, we can start to see that the fish, the basket, the plastic bags, the counter, and so on are part of an interactive whole.

4.8 Sensorial conditions

The sensorial turn takes up those aspects of embodiment – particularly smell, taste, and touch – that have often been left out of the sociolinguistic picture. These senses, as Howes and Classen (2014: 88–89) make clear, are deeply social: odor, for example, is often associated with “ethnic identity and physical hygiene,” a site of racial, ethnic, and class assumptions about others and the ways they live. Smellscapes are an important part of the social semiotic domain (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015b). The Bangladeshi shops in our research almost always sell dried fish, as well as spices, giving a rich background aroma, and it is hard to think of this spatial repertoire without including the many smells that are part of it.

Smell and touch are an important aspect of the shopping experience in corner stores. While supermarkets tend to remove such elements (packaging and controlled sensory environments remove this engagement with food and other items), they are often central in small shops, and shopping experiences in the majority world. From a research point of view, this presents some difficulties. While the video recordings we use help us both to analyze the data in close detail and to present multimodal

accounts of interaction, elements such as smell escape such technologies. In this context, ethnographic research approaches that include senses beyond the standard multimodal categories (i.e. multisensorial ethnographies) are important if we are to capture enough of the totality of the semiotic fact (Pink 2009; Zhu et al. 2017a).

We have also emphasized the importance of sounds beyond the spoken word or other paralinguistic elements. In line 10 in Excerpt 1, the importance of the rustling of the plastic bag as SA1 reaches behind him is not merely that it obscures the spoken word at that point; rather it is part of a gesture that signals this interaction is coming to a close (time to put the products in a bag and pay). In other recordings in this shop, we have noted the importance of the cricket match on the mobile phone, the call to prayer, a motorbike passing outside. These sounds all become part of a wider soundscape that are themselves part of a sensorial landscape that is more than just a backdrop to the other interactions. This is about understanding “the plurality of sensory practices in different cultures and historical periods” as well as “the processual nature of perception” (Howes and Classen 2014: 5). Understanding *intersensoriality* is about both semiotic and social relations.

5 Conclusion: pitfalls and possibilities

While the search for the total linguistic fact will always be an impossible goal – indeed, the various attempts to account for the “total linguistic fact” have never seriously claimed to cover everything – this framework suggests a context for language that responds to the recent broadening of sociolinguistics toward a wider semiotics (Blommaert 2017). The search for a means to account for the total linguistic or semiotic fact will always fall short: we can never get at everything. Attempts to get closer to this totality run the risk of including more and more at the expense of greater analytic depth (a thin horizontal collection of details rather than a vertical depth of interpretation). While this gives us more layered involvement of place, people, artefacts, and semiosis, and thus more possible purchase on the chimerical total linguistic fact, it may also be at the expense of capturing little more than a momentary instance of complexity. There is also the danger of seeking ever more complex models to describe what at heart may be quite simple. A more parsimonious way forward may be to find simple ways to explain complex ideas (Yunkaporta 2019).

Such attempts can nonetheless be useful since they offer “a route past premature reifications, celebrations and exclusions” (Rampton 2016: 472) and allow us to reflect on the reasons why we may or may not want borders around what we hope to include. Why not bodies, things, emotions, and place? We need to have adequate grounds to reject those aspects of the total semiotic fact that we may not consider important. It would not be hard to add to the list suggested by a SEMIOSIS

framework, and I by no means want to claim exhaustive or exclusive coverage. It has been useful, however, to have an updated acronym to think about what is at stake when we analyze social contexts in which language is involved. It is also important to acknowledge that many others, from Goodwin (2013) to Blommaert (2017), have sought to account for similar levels of complexity, while others have arrived at similar understandings of all that is going on in markets and shops (Blackledge and Creese 2020; Zhu et al. 2017a, 2017b).

The idea of assemblages, however, which may be seen as central (though not essential) to this expanded sociolinguistics, opens up a breadth of understanding that allows both a wide set of sociolinguistic artefacts and a means to understand political and economic relations that do not render sociolinguistics secondary to other forms of analysis. Assemblages, as Tsing (2015: 23) reminds us, “don’t just gather lifeways; they make them. Thinking through assemblage urges us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become ‘happenings,’ that is, greater than the sum of their parts?” The different parts of the SEMIOSIS framework often overlap (this was also true of the SPEAKING model) and do not suggest neatly defined domains, but they can help us see how the total semiotic fact becomes a happening. The framework offers us a way of asking what may be at stake in any social interaction that may involve language, and to continue the project that Blommaert (2017) laid out for us.

References

- Agha, Asif. 2007. *Language and social relations*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Austin, John Langshaw. 1962. *How to do things with words: The William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Raleigh-Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bernstein, Basil. 2000. *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique*, revised edn. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Blackledge, Adrian & Angela Creese. 2020. Interaction ritual and the body in a city meat market. *Social Semiotics* 30(1). 1–24.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2005. *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2008. *Grassroots literacy: Writing, identity and voice in Central Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2010. *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2013. *Ethnography, superdiversity and linguistic landscapes: Chronicles of complexity*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2015. Meaning as a nonlinear effect: The birth of cool. *AILA Review* 28. 7–27.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2017. Chronotopes, scales and complexity in the study of language in society. In Karel Arnaut, Martha Sif Karrebaek, Massimiliano Spotti & Jan Blommaert (eds.), *Engaging superdiversity: Recombining spaces, times and language practices*, 47–62. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Blommaert, Jan & Ad Backus. 2013. Superdiverse repertoires and the individual. In Ingrid de Saint-Georges & Jean-Jacques Weber (eds.), *Multilingualism and multimodality: Current challenges for educational studies*, 11–32. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bucholtz, Mary & Kira Hall. 2016. Embodied sociolinguistics. In Nik Coupland (ed.), *Sociolinguistics: Theoretical debates*, 173–197. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. London: Routledge.
- Canagarajah, Suresh. 2007. The ecology of global English. *International Multilingual Research Journal* 1(2). 89–100.
- Canagarajah, Suresh. 2013. *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. New York: Routledge.
- Canagarajah, Suresh. 2018. Translingual practice as spatial repertoires: Expanding the paradigm beyond structuralist orientations. *Applied Linguistics* 39(1). 31–54.
- Clough, Patricia & Jean Halley (eds.). 2007. *The affective turn: Theorizing the social*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Copland, Fiona & Angela Creese. 2015. *Linguistic ethnography: Collecting, analyzing and presenting data*. London: Sage.
- Coulmas, Florian. 2009. The seed of the public sphere. In Elana Shohamy & Durk Gorter (eds.), *Linguistic landscape: Expanding the scenery*, 13–24. London: Routledge.
- Damasio, Antonio. 2018. *The strange order of things: Life, feeling, and the making of cultures*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Demuro, Eugenia & Laura Gurney. 2021. Languages/languageing as world-making: The ontological bases of language. *Language Sciences* 83. 1–13.
- Eckert, Penelope. 2018. *Meaning and linguistic variation: The third wave in sociolinguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 2015. *Where is language? An anthropologist's questions on language, literature and performance*. London: Bloomsbury.
- García, Ofelia & Li Wei. 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goodwin, Charles. 2000. Action and embodiment within situated human interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 32(10). 1489–1522.
- Goodwin, Charles. 2013. The co-operative, transformative organization of human action and knowledge. *Journal of Pragmatics* 46(1). 8–23.
- Gumperz, John. 1964. Linguistic and social interaction in two communities. *American Anthropologist* 66(6, Part 2). 137–153.
- Han, Huamei. 2013. Individual grassroots multilingualism in Africa Town in Guangzhou: The role of states in globalization from below. *International Multilingual Research Journal* 7(1). 83–97.
- Hiratsuka, Akiko & Alastair Pennycook. 2019. Translingual family repertoires: “No, Morci is itaiitai panzita, amor.” *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 41(9). 749–763.
- Howes, David & Constance Classen. 2014. *Ways of sensing: Understanding the senses in society*. London: Routledge.
- Hymes, Dell. 1974. *Foundations in sociolinguistics: An ethnographic approach*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Joseph, John. 2018. *Language, mind and body: A conceptual history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karimzad, Farzad. 2021. Multilingualism, chronotopes, and resolutions: Toward an analysis of the total sociolinguistic fact. *Applied Linguistics* 42. 1–30.
- Karrabæk, Martha Sif. 2017. Thai veggies and hair removal products: Space, objects and language in the urban greengrocery. *Social Semiotics* 27(4). 451–473.
- Kendon, Adam. 2004. *Gesture: Visible action as utterance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Kroskrity, Paul. 2021. Language ideological assemblages within linguistic anthropology. In Alison Burkette & Tamara Warhol (eds.), *Crossing borders, making connections: Interdisciplinarity in linguistics*, 129–142. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kusters, Annelies. 2021. Introduction: The semiotic repertoire: Assemblages and evaluation of resources. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 18(2). 183–189.
- Lee, Jerry Won & Sender Dovchin. 2020. Introduction: Negotiating innovation and ordinariness. In Jerry Won Lee & Sender Dovchin (eds.), *Translinguistics: Negotiating innovation and ordinariness*, 1–5. New York: Routledge.
- May, Stephen. 2014. Contesting metronormativity: Exploring indigenous language dynamism across the urban–rural divide. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* 13(4). 229–235.
- McElhinny, Bonnie. 2010. The audacity of affect: Gender, race, and history in linguistic accounts of legitimacy and belonging. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39. 309–328.
- Oostendorp, Marcelyn. 2021. Raced repertoires: The linguistic repertoire as multi-semiotic and racialized. *Applied Linguistics* 43(1). 65–87.
- Otsuji, Emi & Alastair Pennycook. 2021. Interartefactual translation: Metrolingualism and resemiotization. In Tong King Lee (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of translation and the city*, 59–76. New York: Routledge.
- Panayiotopoulos, Prodromos. 2010. *Ethnicity, migration and enterprise*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Park, Joseph Sung-Yul. 2021. *In pursuit of English: Language and subjectivity in neoliberal South Korea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2017. Translanguaging and semiotic assemblages. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 14(3). 269–282.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2018a. *Posthumanist applied linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2018b. Repertoires, registers, and linguistic diversity. In Angela Creese & Adrian Blackledge (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and superdiversity*, 3–15. London: Routledge.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2019. The landscape returns the gaze: Bikescapes and the new economies. *Linguistic Landscape* 5(3). 217–247.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2020. Translingual entanglements of English. *World Englishes* 39(2). 222–235.
- Pennycook, Alastair. 2024. *Language assemblages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pennycook, Alastair & Emi Otsuji. 2015a. *Metrolingualism: Language in the city*. London: Routledge.
- Pennycook, Alastair & Emi Otsuji. 2015b. Making scents of the landscape. *Linguistic Landscape* 1(3). 191–212.
- Pennycook, Alastair & Emi Otsuji. 2017. Fish, phone cards and semiotic assemblages in two Bangladeshi shops in Sydney and Tokyo. *Social Semiotics* 27(4). 434–450.
- Pennycook, Alastair & Emi Otsuji. 2019. Mundane metrolingualism. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 16(2). 175–186.
- Pennycook, Alastair & Emi Otsuji. 2022. Metrolingual practices and distributed identities: People, places, things and languages. In Wendy Ayres-Bennett & Linda Fisher (eds.), *Multilingualism and identity: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, 69–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pink, Sarah. 2009. *Doing sensory ethnography*. London: Sage.
- Rampton, Ben. 2016. Styling and identity in a second language. In Siân Preece (ed.), *The Routledge handbook of language and identity*, 458–475. London: Routledge.
- Saville-Troike, Muriel. 1982. *The ethnography of communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Schatzki, Theodore. 2001. Introduction: Practice theory. In Karin Knorr Cetina, Theodore Schatzki & Eike von Savigny (eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory*, 1–14. London: Routledge.

- Schatzki, Theodore. 2002. *The site of the social: A philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change*. University Park, Penn: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Sen, Arijit. 2016. Food, place, and memory: Bangladeshi stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago. *Food and Foodways* 24(1–2). 67–88.
- Shohamy, Elana. 2015. LL research as expanding language and language policy. *Linguistic Landscape* 1(1/2). 152–171.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1985. Language and the culture of gender. In Elizabeth Mertz & Richard Parmentier (eds.), *Semiotic mediation*, 219–259. New York: Academic Press.
- Thurlow, Crispin. 2016. Queering critical discourse studies or/and performing ‘post-class’ ideologies. *Critical Discourse Studies* 13(5). 485–514.
- Tsing, Anna. 2015. *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Van Leeuwen, Theo. 2008. *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wilce, James. 2009. *Language and emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wise, Amanda & Selvaraj Velayutham. 2009. Introduction: Multiculturalism and everyday life. In Amanda Wise & Selvaraj Velayutham (eds.), *Everyday multiculturalism*, 1–17. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wortham, Stanton. 2008. Linguistic anthropology of education. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 37(3). 1–15.
- Yunkaporta, Tyson. 2019. *Sand talk: How indigenous thinking can save the world*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.
- Zhu, Hua, Emi Otsuji & Alastair Pennycook. 2017a. Multilingual, multisensory and multimodal repertoires in corner shops, streets and markets: Introduction. *Social Semiotics* 27(4). 383–393.
- Zhu, Hua, Li Wei & Agnieszka Lyons. 2017b. Polish shop(ping) as translanguaging space. *Social Semiotics* 27(4). 411–433.

Bionote

Alastair Pennycook

University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

alastair.pennycook@uts.edu.au

Alastair Pennycook (b. 1957) is Professor Emeritus at the University of Technology Sydney and a research professor at the MultiLing Centre at the University of Oslo. His most recent books include *Innovations and challenges in applied linguistics from the Global South* (2019, with Sinfree Makoni), *Critical applied linguistics: A critical reintroduction* (2021, 2nd edn.), and *Language assemblages* (2024).