

## Jan Blommaert, linguistic landscapes and complexity

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This tribute to the work of Jan Blommaert discusses his complex relation with the field of linguistic landscape studies. Blommaert was interested in the insights an understanding of the linguistic landscape could bring to better appreciate the ways people lived their diverse lives. This appreciation of the importance of his work focuses on his insistence on ethnographic work in order to understand complexity.

**Keywords:** ethnography, complexity, history, Blommaert

One of the great honours in my academic life was being asked to introduce Jan Blommaert's plenary – *Lookalike Language and the Nature of Sociolinguistic Globalization* – at the AILA conference in Brisbane in 2014. Rather than list his many remarkable achievements (an approach to academic hagiography that neither of us liked), I tried to explain what I saw as the importance of Blommaert's work for applied and socio-linguistics. Jan Blommaert was a key figure in the movement that brought sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology back together (after their strange separation in the 1970's (Bucholtz and Hall, 2008)). 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) (we cannot understand texts without investigating their use and users); literacy needs ethnography (Blommaert, 2008) (literacy is a social and cultural practice that needs to be studied in the world); sociolinguistics needs ethnography (Blommaert, 2010) (rather than system, synchrony and variation, we need to see how linguistic resources are mobilised); linguistic landscapes need ethnography (Blommaert, 2013) (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 and explaining the complex structures of superdiverse sociolinguistic systems” (2013: 14). Studies of the Linguistic Landscape (henceforth LL) need therefore to be detailed ethnographic analyses of “situated signs-in-public-space, aimed at identifying the fine fabric of their structure and function in constant interaction with several layers of context” (p. 14). LL research was not an end in itself but a means to understand the layers of sociolinguistic and historical complexity in the world. As Blommaert (2013) shows in his book *Chronicles of Complexity*, the neighbourhood in which he lived – Oud-Berchem, an inner-city part of Antwerp (Jan generously showed me round and talked me through the streets when I visited him there some years ago)<sup>1</sup> – had become over time “a layered and complex array of instruments that enable shifting and unstable groups of people to live there with a modicum of comfort and safety, in delicate and often unseen relationships with each other, and in a general atmosphere of conviviality” (2013: 106).

This is what interested Blommaert: the insights an understanding of the LL could bring to better appreciate the ways people lived their diverse lives. As Spolsky (2020) reminds us, the inclusion of aspects of public signage or a broader semiotics of public space predates the naming of *linguistic landscape* as a field of study (which also possibly suggests the constant referencing of Landry and Bourhis (1997) as the origin of the field rather than the term, may miss the point). Many of us had been noticing and interpreting signs in the public domain for a long time, as had Blommaert over two decades in his own neighbourhood. The point was not to do LL research for its own sake but rather to study the landscape in order to understand mobility, history, and complexity. Jan Blommaert had, as with everything else, a rather complex relationship to the field of LL research, though as colleagues started to note (with a smile) over the last few years, it had become almost impossible to write a paper on LL without reference to Blommaert (at least because of his broader work in the sociolinguistics of globalization). When the first (double) issue of this journal (he was an editorial board member) was published in 2015, it was met with a strong critique from Blommaert (2016) of what he described as ‘the conservative turn in Linguistic Landscape Studies’. Without going into the range of critiques he made, a central concern was that some papers in that first issue made it seem as if LL was now an established tradition with its own methods and canonical texts, and that this tended to downplay the need for what he called Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA). While we should rightly celebrate the development of this journal (the hard work

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1. This walk included one moment that has always amused me: I asked Jan how he managed to write so much. He stopped in the street, looked down at me (he was a tall man) and said: “Pennycook asks me this?”

of the editors, the affordances for innovative studies bringing semiotics and linguistics back into conversation with each other, the wealth of fascinating papers from different parts of the world), it's also important to heed Blommaert's warnings about the solidification of methods and the canonisation of texts, as well as his insistence on the importance of ethnography, history, and complexity.

And the plenary in Brisbane, 2014? To be honest – and we need to be, and I talked to Blommaert about this afterwards – it wasn't the greatest of plenaries, not so much because, as happens to all of us tasked with these difficult public performances, he was having an off day (jet-lagged, tired), but mainly because he hadn't followed his own precepts for ethnographic approaches to the LL. While some might wish to (and did) critique this apparent hypocrisy – preaching complexity and ethnography while delivering hastily-taken images and underdone analyses of signs in China and elsewhere – the story is itself more complex. We can't always do what we think should be done, and while Blommaert did a great deal of excellent ethnographic work (and gave many brilliant and illuminating talks), he had at this point over-extended himself. As he explains in his poignant reflexions on academic life (Blommaert, 2020), he had allowed himself to become prey to the “academic industrial culture” that developed during his career (and see Connell, 2019, for a clear analysis of this). Along with the “almost-totalized individualization of academic work and performance measurement, with constant inter-individual competition driving young and vulnerable colleagues to extreme and dangerous levels of stress and investment in work rather than life,” this also produced “a veritable celebrity culture in academia, in which mega-conferences take the shape of pop festivals with rockstar headliners bringing their greatest hits in front of an audience of poorly paid struggling academics who spent their personal holiday budgets purchasing a ticket for such events.”


This new culture, he argues, “took away and delegitimized a previous culture, one of collegial dialogue, collaboration, slowness, time to think, to reflect and to doubt, periods of invisibility and absence from public stages – because one was doing some serious bit of research, for instance.” As he admits, he had become one of those rock stars, which arguably contributed greatly to the premature end to his life on Jan 7th 2021, and, of less importance, to an underwhelming plenary that day in 2014. The point I want to take from this is that we, as participants in that academic culture, have to share responsibility here. We may be critical of neoliberal academic life, and we may find it somewhat disingenuous to argue for complexity without necessarily doing it oneself, but we are also, many of us, complicit with the making and breaking of such academic stars (which is also why, reflecting on my good friend Jan's early death, amongst other things, I have decided to step away from institutional academic life myself). In sum, if we want a useful,

takeaway message from Blommaert's work and life (from the things done well and sometimes not so well), I would suggest this: Less hubris; more complexity.

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## Publication history

Date received: 27 January 2021  
 Date accepted: 1 February 2021