

Neighbourhood talk, imitation, and the management of social life in conditions of superdiversity

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Abstract

The Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) has observed that every word ever spoken has been said by someone else, somewhere else, at sometime else, or in short, in another chronotopic timespace. This observation about one form of imitation has received much uptake in sociolinguistics (broadly defined), with the work of Tannen (1989) and the collection in Silverstein and Urban (1996) helping define the study of imitation in social life. In this paper, I draw on work on imitation and gossip (Besnier, 2009) to examine neighbourhood talk in an Indonesian urban ward where neighbours come from all across Indonesia. While these neighbours are Indonesian, their backgrounds and experiences are highly varied (ethnicity, religion, language, education, rural, urban, histories of mobility, etc.). This situation – increasingly referred to as “superdiversity” in social science (Vertovec, 2007) – required these neighbours to jointly formulate new norms for the conduct of social life in this ward. Building on some of my other work in this ward (Goebel, 2010, In press), my paper focuses on how imitation figures in the formulation of a ward voice about norms for the conduct of social life in this new setting. My data will be drawn from a recording of one women’s monthly meeting that I recorded as part of a study of neighborhood talk I conducted in two wards of Semarang while living in one of them between 1995 and 1998. In closing, I point to how insights from this study have broader implications for humanities and social sciences scholarship which continue to grapple with the concept of superdiversity and how to study it in emergent neighbourhoods around the world (Arnaut, Blommaert, Rampton, & Spotti, 2015; Arnaut, Karrebæk, Spotti, & Blommaert, 2016; Blommaert, 2010; Creese, Blackledge, & Hu, 2016; Goebel, 2010, 2015; Simpson, 2016).

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