

Superdiversity

J. Normann Jørgensen and Kasper Juffermans

(Glossary entry, <http://www.toolkit-online.eu/docs/superdiversity.html>, 2011.)

Short version

Superdiversity is a term for the vastly increased range of resources, linguistic, religious, ethnic, cultural in the widest sense, that characterize late modern societies. The term stands for a “diversification of diversity” and describes a new order which is influenced by two sets of developments. One is the changing migrational patterns which can be observed in Europe. A second factor is the technological developments which have made new social media of communication accessible to the masses, with mobile phones and the internet. These developments mean that the individual in late modern superdiverse societies is likely to encounter a much wider range of resources than was characteristic of Europe just a few decades ago. A consequence of this superdiversity is an increasingly important lack of predictability in everyday life. People must be prepared to meet and interpret phenomena, behaviors, attitudes, and meaning which they have not encountered before, in new contexts.

Long version

Superdiversity is a term for the vastly increased range of resources, linguistic, religious, ethnic, cultural in the widest sense, that characterize late modern societies. The term has been coined by Vertovec (2006, 1-2) in a review of demographic and socio-economic changes in post-Cold War Britain: “Super-diversity underscores the fact that the new conjunctions and interactions of variables that have arisen over the past decade surpass the ways - in public discourse, policy debates and academic literature - that we usually understand diversity in Britain”.

Superdiversity should be understood as *diversification of diversity*, as diversity that cannot be understood in terms of multiculturalism (the presence of multiple cultures in one society) alone. At the basis of this paradigm shift are two sets of developments that can be observed in Europe and world-wide. One is the changing patterns and itineraries of migration from the outside into Europe and continued migration by the same people inside Europe: “more people are now moving from more places, through more places, to more places” (Vertovec 2010:86). In effect, people bring with them continuously more different resources and experiences from a variety of places in their everyday interactions and encounters with others and institutions. A second factor is the technological developments which have made new social media of communication accessible to the masses, with mobile phones and the Internet (e.g., social network sites). These developments mean that the individual in superdiversity is likely to meet a much wider range of resources than was characteristic of Europe just a few decades ago.

A consequence of this superdiversity is an increasingly important lack of predictability. A few decades ago it would be possible to predict with some degree of certainty what a 14-year old grade school student in, for instance, Berlin would be like - looks, mother tongue, religious affiliation,

cultural preferences, musical taste, and in other ways. The range of resources available to and employed by 14-year old grade school students in Germany was limited compared to what we observe today - none of this can today be predicted with any substantial degree of certainty. Blommaert (2010, 7) observes that “[t]he presuppositions of common integration policies – that we know who the immigrants are, and that they have a shared language and culture – can no longer be upheld”. Fanshawe & Sriskandarajah (2010) take the observation a step further and criticize the routine reference to “protected strands” (gender, race, disability, sexuality, faith and belief, age) in efforts to eliminate discrimination and inequality – there is no (longer) any single dimension along which to work with these concepts, or with “identities”. Their argument is that in the context of superdiversity, we need a new politics of identity: people can’t be put in box anymore.

The superdiverse conditions call for a revisiting and reinventing of our theoretical toolkit to analyse and understand phenomena of language and communication (see Blommaert and Rampton 2011). For instance, it makes concepts such as “speech community”, “ethnic groups”, “minority” very difficult to maintain in any sense. It requires us to *study* rather than *assume* relations between ethnicity, citizenship, residence, origin, profession, legal status, class, religion and language. A superdiversity perspective on society problematises the countability and representability of cultures, languages and identities (see also our languaging lemma here), which is why superdiversity can be understood as post-multiculturalism (Vertovec 2010).

The concept of superdiversity has been theorised primarily in relation to the UK and, by extension, contemporary Europe. It is, however, evident that other societies have experienced and still experience superdiversity, and that superdiversity may be a much older condition in other places, India and Africa being obvious examples which include societies of long-standing superdiversity, although not necessarily late modern.

References

- Blommaert, Jan (2010): *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blommaert, Jan and Ben Rampton (2011): *Language and Superdiversity: A Position Paper*. Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies, 70.
- Fanshawe, Simon & Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah (2010): ‘You Can’t Put Me In A Box’. Superdiversity and the end of identity politics in Britain. Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Vertovec, Steven (2006): *The Emergence of Super-Diversity in Britain*. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Papers, 25. Oxford University.
- Vertovec, Steven (2010): *Towards Post-Multiculturalism? Changing Conditions, Communities and Contexts of Diversity*. *International Social Science Journal* 61: 83-95.