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Acknowledgments

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My former colleague Theo van Leeuwen, coordinated, directed and inspired the programme for four years until a career move took him away from Cardiff, at which point I took on the coordinating role, but with Theo’s continuing guidance and involvement. About 14 Cardiff colleagues played some significant part in the programme’s development and in the dissemination of its findings, although not all of them appear in the pages of the Handbook.

Under the aegis of the ‘Language and Global Communication’ programme, one international conference and a regular series of workshops were held, and several of the contributors to the present volume participated in those events. The Leverhulme Trust has therefore supported this volume in more ways than might be initially apparent, which, once again, I very gratefully acknowledge.

I am particularly grateful to my colleague Adam Jaworski for the leading role he has played in many aspects of our work on globalisation, and not only in his pioneering research in the sociolinguistics of global tourism.

As seems to be inevitable with Handbook-length projects, this volume has been a long time coming. I thank the earliest on-time contributors for their patience, and colleagues at Wiley-Blackwell for theirs too, also for their professional guidance.

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NC
July 2009
Introduction: Sociolinguistics in the Global Era

NIKOLAS COUPLAND

The End of Globalization?

The gestation period of this Handbook has been an interesting time for observers of globalization. The international ‘credit crunch,’ apparently triggered by irresponsible over-lending in the United States but in reality the result of financial laxness on a wider scale, has led to severe economic retrenchment in many parts of the world. Several nation-states have moved to restrict some of the more obvious excesses of global capitalism, initially in the banking and finance sectors. But there are indications of a more general global wariness about flows of money and people, which suggests that national authority and national political initiative are not, after all, in terminal decline. There has also been repeated visible political resistance to fast capitalist globalization: for example the estimated 35,000 people who marched in London in March 2009 in opposition to the agenda of the G20 summit – a meeting of the leaders of the twenty most economically powerful nations – under the slogans “Put people first” and “Jobs, justice, climate.” Should we conclude that, after all, this is not such a “runaway world” (Giddens 2002) of rampant globalization?

Academic commentators, including several contributors to this Handbook, observe that, whatever globalization is, it isn’t an altogether new phenomenon. Indeed, ‘it’s nothing new’ proves to be one of the least new things to say about globalization, but it is an important observation. As, for example, Mufwene (this volume) points out, colonization in its various modes has been characteristic of more aggressive and more benign encounters between peoples throughout history. Colonization in different eras and contexts meant transnational expansion of economic, military, and cultural sorts. It certainly reshaped global arrangements, including linguistic ones. We are also historically familiar with ‘empire,’ old and new (Hardt and Negri 2000), in the British case from the mid-seventeenth century, and many have interpreted globalization as latter-day imperialist hegemony, often in the form of westernization or Americanization or McDonaldization (or
other, even more inventive, neologisms of this kind – see Mooney, this volume). So why all this fuss about globalization now?

As Kellner (1989) points out, large-scale shifts to more globally based economic arrangements were predicted and theorized well before our own time. Key voices on both sides of early ideological debates about capitalism predicted an increasing globalization of capitalist markets. Adam Smith, for example, anticipated the emergence of a (beneficial and liberalizing, in his view) world market system, while Karl Marx saw global emancipation for the proletariat in the demise of national interests and frameworks and in the onset of internationally grounded revolution. Transnational interdependencies and influences are, once again then, ‘nothing new.’

So, as we embark on an exploration of language and globalization, do we in fact believe that globalization currently exists as a new social condition, or that it deserves extensive treatment across the disciplines? Is globalization an economic experiment in retreat, or perhaps a faddish academic concept of the 1990s that refers to historical social processes we were already pretty familiar with? In the rest of this section I would like to make a pitch for the social reality of globalization and for its contemporary importance – both as a social mode that we need to keep probing and as a focus for some new ways of understanding language in society. We have to concede that globalization is complex and multi-faceted, and difficult to delimit chronologically. The concept is often over-consolidated, over-hyped, and under-interpreted. But I want to argue (drawing on the views of many others) that it is an indispensable concept, particularly if we take it as shorthand reference to a cluster of changed and still fast changing social arrangements and priorities which are indeed distinctive and (despite opinions to the contrary) indeed new. Having done this, I will try to map out, in four sections that outline the four parts of this volume, how the forthcoming chapters inform our understanding of the many productive and necessary links between ‘language’ and ‘globalization.’

What, then, might persuade us to take globalization seriously and to accept that social analysis needs to be framed in relation to an already globalized and increasingly globalizing world? We might start with a quasi-ethnographic appeal to lived experience and perceptions of social change, say, over the last forty or fifty years. What macro-level social changes have impacted on us (or, at least for the purposes of this initial sketch, on the ‘us’ defined by the privileged lives lived in the west or the north, and through British eyes)? Answers will be tropes of lifespan discourse: “Back then, things were different...”; “I remember the days when...” But such autobiographical fragments would point to the sorts of social change that constitute globalization. I venture some of my own fragments below.¹ I would say that we have experienced:

• an increasing mediation of culture and greater cultural reflexivity
• the proliferation and speeding up of communication technologies
• a large shift to service-sector work, globally dispersed
• the decline of the (British) Establishment