

Chapter 104

Lifestyle Diglossia and Mobile: Ethnography of Multilingual Interaction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes to chart the development of understanding of literacy as a practice, which is now digital in nature and globally distributed, therefore digital literacy practices require new lenses and ways of research explorations. The notion of literacy has shifted from being autonomous to ideological during the last three decades. It is not seen anymore as a single unified competence, but as changing from place to place and varying in different social-cultural contexts. Despite the fact that there are different writing systems that are used in different ways in different contexts, the differences between them are no longer seen as primarily technical (Graff, 1979; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993). The differences that do exist between literacies are seen as being due to differences in cultural practices, values and ideologies. As a consequence, the methodological shift towards ethnographic research on literacy has arisen from a fundamental change in thinking about the nature of literacy and the development of the “new literacy studies” (Street, 1993: 4). Ethnographic approaches to literacy, such as those developed by Heath (1983), Street (1984), Barton (1991, 1994) and others are based on the everyday uses of written language(s) by specific groups and subgroups in a specific locality. According to Graff, these approaches to literacy provide “both new and better cases for study, opportunity for explanations, and approaches to literacy’s variable historical meaning and contribution” (1986: 127). The ethnographic research on literacies in multilingual contexts (e.g. Saxena, 1994; Hartley, 1994) further contributed to the development of ‘new literacy studies’ (NLS). However, with the development of mobile devices during the last decade and the allied software industries, digital literacy communication has become synonymous with globalisation and a divergence between the literacy practices in ‘regulated spaces’ and ‘unregulated spaces’ (Sebba, 2009) particularly among the youth is becoming a marked feature of inter-personal communication. Sebba defines ‘unregulated spaces’ as places where the prescriptiveness of standardisation and monolingualism has not yet reached, or where it holds no power and practices may deviate from the prescribed norms. Such spaces open up opportunities for identity construction and group definition.

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on multilingual literacy practices in online communication are relatively new and largely unexplored. Yet, these practices are beginning to appear in a variety of digital genres: for example, multilingual emails (Hinrichs, 2005, 2006), blogging (Montes-Alcala, 2007) online discussion forums (Lewin and Donner, 2002; McLellan, 2005), instant messaging (Ling, 2005; Andoutsopoulos, 2006; Apriana, 2006; Sebba 2007), online chats (Warschauer et al., 2002; Lam, 2005) and Flickr (Barton, 2015). What these studies are showing is how through the transformative and hybrid practices observed in these digital genres the producers are constructing transcultural and global identities. For example, Lam (2000, 2005, 2009) has investigated the linguistically and culturally blended literacy practices of Chinese-American students in their online interactions with peers. She argues that such practices allow these young Chinese-Americans to engage in virtual crossings of physical and societal boundaries and to experience ‘transculturation’ rather than ‘acculturation’ (Lam, 2006). Warschauer et al. (2002) have also carried out a study of multilingual online communication among young Egyptian professionals in Cairo. They found that English was predominantly used in their formal e-mail correspondence and in web-browsing. However, communication in informal e-mail correspondence and in online chats was mostly in Egyptian Arabic, with frequent code-switching into English, and the Arabic was written in a Romanised script. Commenting on these findings, Warschauer (2009: 126) says:

The extensive use of English among this group reflected their elite background, their use of technology for professional purposes in a globalized economy, and the still undeveloped nature of text editors, e-mail clients, and other text software capable of handling Arabic script at the time of the study. Nevertheless, their use of Egyptian Arabic whenever possible allowed them...to express hybrid forms of communication and identity.

This hybrid form of communication, as Warschauer argues, expresses global identity. What we also need to recognise at the same time, as I will show in this paper, is that such identities may also come into conflict with local ideologies of nation-states, as in the case of Brunei Darussalam in South East Asia, which provides the context for my study.

The data for this paper is drawn from ethnographic research on multilingualism in Brunei Darussalam (Brunei hereafter) conducted as part of three funded projects¹. The research was based on case studies of 23 students, aged 20-24 years, who were identified on the basis of their specific backgrounds: first, they were all of Malay background; second, they were pursuing degree programmes in English at the local national university (participants were selected from two programmes); third, they had their private primary education in English-medium schools; fourth, their parents had a university education and some of them had completed their higher education in English-speaking countries, mainly the UK; fifth, in their homes, English was used alongside Malay; and, finally, they were conversant with and used regularly mobile and web-based technologies (e.g. SMSs, emails, internet chat rooms and blogs). They were asked to keep two-week-long literacy diaries, along with samples of the texts they produced, and they were asked to write about their literacy histories. Following this, they were interviewed on the issues that emerged from the diaries and the narratives.

In the first section of the paper I will describe the sociolinguistic background of Brunei and particularly how the linguistic capital of Malay, the national language, and English are produced. Then I will show how young Bruneians are socialised into English in unregulated spaces and the role of global

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