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From the Editors

Multilingual and multimodal practices at a global startup: Toward a spatial approach to language and literacy in professional contexts

Steven Fraiberg

Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures, Michigan State University, 252 Ernst Bessey Hall, East Lansing, MI, 48824, United States

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ABSTRACT

In the area of literacy studies and ESP scholarship, there has been a shift towards a more holistic approach that situates writing as one resource within a semiotic repertoire. Extending this focus, this case study of an Israeli high-tech startup company uncovers the ways multilingual and multimodal workplace activities are mediated by a complex and dynamic array of text, tools, actors and objects distributed across social and geographic spaces. Central to the analysis is an argument for a more spatialized and material framework for the study and teaching of language and literacy practices.

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1. Introduction

On the third floor of a converted apartment building in central Tel Aviv sits an internet design firm Networld catering to many of the leading companies in the Israeli high-tech industry. The revolving door of clients that continually come and go from the company are part of the wider flows or scapes reshaping the country's cultural and linguistic landscape. As a country of only seven million people with its narrowest border only 15 km across, the global high-tech sector is deeply influencing the linguistic, cultural, and geographic borders as the nation undergoes rapid socioeconomic transformations. Accompanying these moves has been a shift from Hebrew as the dominant language to a situation in which English is commonplace in many domains. These shifts are evident at companies such as Networld where English (as a lingua franca of the high-tech sector) is deeply woven into everyday mundane and routine writing, reading, speaking, and design practices. It is to this dense interweaving that I turn in order to develop a more fine grained understanding of multilingual and multimodal literacy practices in internet startups. In making this move, I specifically turn to situated and practice-based frameworks that conceptualize language as one resource within a wider semiotic repertoire (Fraiberg, 2010; Kusters, Spotti, Swanick, & Tapio, 2017), including image, objects, text, talk, and gesture. Building on this more holistic approach, my framework is further aligned with the new materialism 1and spatial geography (Barad, 2007; Latour, 2005) in a shift from the notion of space as a backdrop or stage against which activity takes place towards an understanding of spaces as sedimented with ideologies that shape and are shaped by everyday activity and literacy practices. A challenge to container models (Leander, Phillips, Taylor, Nespor, & Lewis, 2010; Prior, 1998) often used in workplace studies, this frame understands space as a constellation of social relations (Massey, 2005) co-constituted by everyday literate activities.

E-mail address: sfraibe2@gmail.com.

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My study draws on and contributes to ESP scholarship in business and professional communication. In this area, scholars have focused on a range of professional and written genres: direct sales and promotional (Bhatia, 1993; van Nus, 1999), faxes (Louhiala-Salminen, 1997), annual reports (Hyland, 1998), invitations for bids (Belotti, 2006), legal judgments (Mazzi, 2006), medical research reports (Williams, 1996), and legal documents (Mazzi, 2006). This research has generally focused on move analysis (Swales, 1990) to identify key features of specific texts. Adopting a situated and ethnographically informed approach has been a related strand of scholarship increasingly focused on *in situ* workplace activities (Bhatia, Jones, Bremner, & Peirson-Smith, 2013; Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Handford & Matous, 2015; Mondada & Svinhufvud, 2016; Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014; Smart, 1998; Sun, 2012; Virkkula-Raisanen, 2010). For example, focused on multilingual practices at the subsidiary of a multinational corporation in Finland, Louhiala-Salminen (2002) shadowed a mid-level manager and examined how writing and speaking were densely intermingled in his workplace activities. Further uncovering this complex intermingling, Cheng and Mok (2008) conducted a six-day study of a land survey management project in Hong Kong. In this project, they traced workplace activity across chains of written texts (primarily in English) and talk (primarily in Cantonese). As part of a more holistic approach, they argued thus:

> In professional communication, the borderline between spoken and written modes of communication, as well as the complexities regarding the choice of communication channel, be they telephone, video-conference, face-to-face, or computer mediated, are usually difficult to draw in practice, as the flow of discourse inevitably mixes one with the other when the professionals go about their work, interacting with colleagues both within and outside the organization. (p. 62)

Their study further examined a response to a query for information that included a data sheet incorporating multimodal diagrams. As these findings make evident, the participants engaged in a complex web of interdiscursive (Bhatia, 2010) practices. Attending to this process from a wider social, historical, and critical perspective, K. Jones (2000) mapped out the manner in which the European Union is reshaping day-to-day Welsh/English routines through textually mediated practices involving writing and face-to-face encounters (mixing English and Welsh). Through situated study she linked everyday literacy practices to wider social and state structures. Further attending to this complex web of interactions is scholarship on the ways that texts, talk, media, modes, and an array of other objects jointly mediate workplace activities (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Fraiberg, 2010, 2013; Mondada & Svinhufvud, 2016; Kell, 2009; Pennycook, 2017; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014; Virkkula-Raisanen, 2010). This scholarship includes attention to the intersections between multilingualism (translanguaging) and multimodality (transmodality) in restaurants and corner shops, open markets, urban planning projects, workplace meetings, and high-tech startups. Despite such moves, the focus on multimodality in professional multilingual settings remains limited. Moreover, less attention has been devoted to the processes through which multimodal objects are produced (e.g., web pages, pamphlets, architectural drawings) (Fraiberg, 2010, 2013; Kell, 2009).

2. Theoretical framework

Multimodality is a term associated with multiliteraices (New London Group, 2000) and the new literacy studies (Jewitt, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). A central tenet of this approach is an understanding of language as one resource within a wider communicative repertoire, including image, gesture, sound, and gaze. Jointly mediating activity, these modes afford and constrain meaning making as they shape and are shaped in the context of everyday interaction. Closely related to this tenet is an understanding of all communication as multimodal. For instance, a text might include use of bold, capitalization, indents, and white space. Similarly, talk might include gesture, gaze, intonation, facial expressions, bodily alignment, and the reading from written notes or a Power Point slide. Such assumptions underscore the need for a more holistic approach to language and literacy studies. They further point to the need for a more material framework (Rowsell, 2013) with fine grained attention to how semiotic repertories—or what Pennycook and Otsuji (2014) refer to as spatial repertories—shape and are shaped by everyday practices.

Moving towards a practice-based approach, writing and literacy scholarship has begun to attend to the materiality of multimodal practices, while drawing on phenomenological traditions that foreground the situated, dynamic, distributed, and spatialized nature of everyday literate activities (Blommaert, 2013; Heath & Luff, 2000; Iedema, 2003; Kell, 2009; Medway, 1996; Norris & Jones, 2005; Pennycook, 2016; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014; Prior, 1998; Prior & Hengst, 2010; Prior & Shipka, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Scollon, 2001; Shipka, 2011; Toohey et al., 2015). These frameworks incorporate various strands of research from ethnomethodology, mediated discourse analysis, sociocultural theory, and the sociology of science (Latour, 2005). Central to these approaches is the complexly mediated nature of activity, as well as the notion that actors cannot be understood apart from their tools in use (Wertsch, 1991). This includes durable tools (e.g., papers, pens, mobile phones) and non-durable tools (national tropes, ideologies, talk) distributed across near and far flung contexts. This framework challenges neutral and static understandings of context and space, and instead conceptualizes them as sedimented with ideologies that orient (and are oriented by) the activities of the actors.

Bringing these various theoretical strands together, Prior and Hengst (2010) adopt the notion of semiotic remediation. The term remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1998) draws on the notion that all media is created from older forms of media (e.g., a web site repurposed from a print newspaper). While the concept has been primarily taken up in relation to visual media, Prior and Hengst extend it to the application of all semiotic modes, including gesture. Gesture is a particularly telling move, as it points to the embodied, social, and dialogic nature of this process. Drawing on this analytic lens, even a basic act such as handing

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