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Introduction: Literacy ideologies

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ABSTRACT

This special section explores contexts in which established ways of using written language have been retooled to support indigenous or "non-mainstream" ideologies of authority, including the incorporation of novel literacies into existing local language practices. This collection of papers addresses potential conflicts between historical and/or hegemonic literacy ideologies and novel literacy practices by illustrating ways in which authoritative semiotic modalities can be utilized to legitimize a form of literacy that was non-existent or has historically been positioned as inferior to standardized, hegemonic forms of writing. This introduction provides some relevant working definitions, points to common themes in the collection, and summarizes the ethnographic contexts explored by contributors to the special section.

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1. The section

Over the past few decades, attention paid to language ideologies has engaged with speaker authority and linguistic legitimacy over a broad range of ethnographic contexts, reflecting Bourdieu's understanding of how language users in many modalities and media anchor and bolster their power within languages and social systems (1991; see also Bialostok and Whitman, 2006). This collection of papers converses with that body of scholarship with a particular focus on tacit and salient ideologies of literacy—"literacy" defined broadly as mastery of a visual semiotic system but by no means limited to alphabetic or syllabic writing systems.

The section explores a variety of contexts in which established ways of using written language have been retooled to support indigenous or "non-mainstream" language ideologies of authority, including the incorporation of novel literacies into existing local language practices and the contributions literacy practices make to the construction of linguistically authoritative identities in a given ethnographic context. The authors address potential conflicts between historical and/or hegemonic literacy ideologies and novel literacy practices by demonstrating a variety of ways in which authoritative semiotic modalities can be utilized, re-interpreted, or re-deployed to legitimize a form of literacy that was non-existent or has historically been positioned as inferior to standardized, hegemonic forms of writing. With this brief introduction, I provide some relevant working definitions, point to common themes in the collection, and finally summarize the ethnographic contexts explored in this section.

2. Language ideology

Linguistic anthropology's systematic and decades-long critique of structuralism has resulted in a prevalent interest in indexicality, as more energy is dedicated not to Saussure's *langue* but to the ways in which *langue* and *parole* both are inextricably situated in nonlinguistic social systems and practices. As Constantine Nakassis observed in his 2016 review

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article, "Note that every major analytic the field utilized in 2015"—entextualization, interdiscursivity, iconization, chronotope, and ideology, to name a few—"not only is not unique to language but … shows how language is caught up in, and ultimately constituted by, indexical processes and modalities beyond itself" (331).

Studies of language ideology, as one of the most common analytics now used by linguistic anthropologists to address metasemiotic activities, often begin with a definition of language ideology similar to that formulated by Judith Irvine: a "cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests" (Irvine, 1989:255; recent work in this vein includes Cohen, 2015; Karrebaek and Ghandchi, 2015; Kroskrity, 2015; Stæhr and Madsen, 2015. Other definitions highlight the self-conscious use of such sets of ideas "as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Silverstein, 1979:193) or focus on value or hierarchy of languages and speakers, an inclination the articles in this collection share (see also Nakassis, 2016; Cooper and Nguyen, 2015; Costa, 2015; Hiramoto and Park, 2014; LaDousa, 2014; McIntosh, 2014; Sherouse, 2015; Tupas, 2015; Zentz, 2014).

Luke Fleming's (2015) critique of this approach, however, reminds users of language ideology frameworks to be wary of treating language ideologies as "top down" creators of semiotic practices when in fact ideologies are just as likely to arise from practices as to create them. The study of language ideology is then, to reiterate Nakassis's point above, less about language than about interlocking ideological frameworks and their relationships with other modalities of social interaction and communication. In a partial response to Fleming's critique, the use of language ideology as a primary analytic breaks into sub-analytics and related semiotic arenas, reminiscent of Irvine and Gal's "fractal recursivity" (2000). Some examples of this tendency include semiotic ideologies (Keane, 2014; Knowlton, 2015), textual ideologies (Faudree, 2015), and ideologies of authenticity and authority (Wang, 2015; Wilce and Fenigsen, 2015). This collection itself is another example of this type of work, which 1) focuses on a particular suite of ideologies, and 2) engages particularly with aspects of ideology that tend to create or reinforce value judgments and linguistic hierarchies.

3. Literacy ideology

One model in which different written styles, genres, and forms are placed in hierarchies and laden with differential values is what Street (1984, 1993) dubbed "the autonomous model" of literacy. The "autonomy" of literacy under this model positions reading and writing as "independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character" (Street, 1984, 5). The model suggests that orality is an early step on an evolutionary track towards a more advanced literate society. This ideology manifests in a variety of attempts to measure literacy, many of which are conceptually flawed:

> Assessments that incorporate scales of [literacy] tasks rely upon four key assumptions that should be considered: the idea that literacy is a cognitive skill possessed (or not) by individuals; the belief that skills can be arrayed hierarchically; the idea that the hierarchy of skills is universal, that is, that it is the same across different languages and contexts; and the belief that literacy is measurable. (Bartlett, 2008, 740)

The autonomous model situates (its narrowly defined sense of) literacy as a source of authority and prestige, influencing the perceived value and effectiveness of new genres of semiotic mediation. For example, the "literacy rate" statistics seen in educational, human rights, and national development discourses employ the autonomous model, using a limited definition of what constitutes literacy and accepting it as a reflection of the relative advancement and status of a given individual, community, or nation.

A different sense of literacy—one more common in current scholarly literature and employed here—conceptualizes literacies more flexibly as various "way(s) of using written language," which nods to social context rather than signifying an individual's ability, and allows for a variety of intentions and forms underlying literacy practices (Ivanic, 1998, 58). It refers to any number of semiotic systems themselves rather than an individual's ability to use one in particular. Literacy and writing technologies cannot be assumed to follow similar trajectories cross-culturally, as ethnographic studies of changing literacy practices and orthographic choices demonstrate (see Collins, 1995; Debenport, 2012; Schieffelin, 1996; Schieffelin and Doucet, 1994; Schieffelin and Gilmore, 1986; Sebba, 2007, 2013; Whiteley, 2003). Known as the "ideological model," this understanding of literacies encourages researchers to account for the context-dependent nature of literacy practices and events, and recognizes that "literacy" as we use the word in popular speech is not so easily defined or measured.

This second way of defining literacy can also refer to a more generalized competency as commonly used in the phrase "computer literacy." To be computer literate may not require written language at all. Rather, it requires mastery of a specialized semiotic system. This second framework holds that literacy skills and the acquisition thereof are in no way neutral acts, and no universal cognitive or societal attributes linked with literacy exist. The most productive way to understand literacies, then, is in terms of contextualized social practice. As Niko Besnier observes: "Rather than seeking an overarching and context-free characterization of the cognitive and social consequences of literacy, proponents of the ideological model focus on the activities, events, and ideological constructs associated with particular manifestations of literacy" (1995: 5). More than the acquisition of a writing technology or a suite of cognitive skills universal to all "literate" people, learning any literacy involves being socialized to contextualized practices with social, political, and ideological significance which varies across places, times, media, and genres—all laden with value judgments. In short, an ideological understanding of literacy has more in common with the ideas of discourse and practice than writing technology. It allows for a plurality of literacies to include a wide variety of relevant practices that any given individual or community may employ.

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