

## Chapter 5

### Bi/Multilingual Literacies in Literacy Studies

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#### INTRODUCTION

As we embarked on writing on the topic of bilingual/multilingual literacies, we were initially stuck with the difficult question of how we could introduce a field of studies that seems to be undergoing rapid re-conceptualization and witnessing mounting tensions between not just old and new terms but also radically different ways of conceptualizing language and literacy practices. Traditional ways of thinking about literacies as manifested in the use of terms such as bilingual literacies, multilingual literacies, or even plurilingual literacies have increasingly come under challenge by the rise of recent terms such as translanguaging (García 2009) and translingual practice (Canagarajah 2013a, 2013b). In what follows we shall first outline these new theoretical developments from early to recent work that has sought to break through the monolingual ideologies governing our understanding of literacy. Then we shall discuss how the recent re-conceptualization of literacy practices stands to highlight the heteroglossic social relations embedded in literacy practices. We shall illustrate these new conceptualizations of translingual literacies with examples from the case of Hong Kong where Cantonese, English and Chinese literacies have been mixing and matching for over a century. In the concluding section, the theoretical and empirical challenges facing the field now are discussed and future directions for research are suggested.

#### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

Street's (1984, 1995, 2003) critique of what he calls the autonomous model of literacy represents one of the most important early attempts to problematize the monolingual and ahistorical ideologies dominating the field of literacy studies in the past century. Under the autonomous model, literacy is conceived as a uniform set of techniques and skills that are naturalized as having universal cognitive and social benefits:

The standard view in many fields, from schooling to development programs, works from the assumption that literacy in itself --autonomously--will have effects on other social and cognitive practices. Introducing literacy to poor, "illiterate" people, villages, urban youth etc. will have the effect of enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their "illiteracy" in the first place. I refer to this as an "autonomous" model of literacy. The model, I suggest, disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have these benign effects. (Street 2003: 77)

Street suggests instead an ideological model which conceives literacies as multiple and socially constructed (see also Gee's chapter on new literacies in this volume):

This model starts from different premises than the autonomous model--it posits instead that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. .... Literacy, in this sense, is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always "ideological", they are always rooted in a particular world-view and in a desire for that view of literacy to dominate and to marginalize others. (Street 2003: 77-78)

Hornberger and her colleagues have further developed and elaborated the continua of biliteracy framework (Hornberger 1992; Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000), which encompasses four intersecting and nested continua: development, content, media, and contexts. These four continua demonstrate the multiple and complex interrelationships between bilingualism and literacy and the importance of the contexts, media, and content through which biliteracy develops. Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000) further point out that traditional power relations have often privileged monolingual, decontextualized literacies (see Figure 5.1), "such that being able to state truths that hold, regardless of context, has been a part of speaking the language of power" (110).

**[Insert Figure 5.1 about here]**

Hornberger and her colleagues' work on the continua of biliteracy seeks to provide a comprehensive framework to analyse the complex aspects of biliteracy and how power relations have always figured predominantly in both the development and valuation of literacies (e.g., how certain literacies carry more currency than others in specific contexts). This work converges with Rampton's (1995) research on language crossing among Anglo, Afro-Caribbean, and Panjabi adolescents in Britain. Rampton

(1995) problematizes the notions of native speaker and mother tongue for the assumptions underlying these terms can no longer be taken for granted: for example, we can no longer assume that a particular language is inherited (genetically or socially); that people either are or are not native/mother tongue speakers; or that people are native speakers of one mother tongue. Rampton thus argues that it is better to think in terms of *expertise*, *affiliation*, and *inheritance*. Expertise refers to a speaker's skill, proficiency, and ability to operate with a language while affiliation and inheritance are two different, socially negotiated routes to a sense of allegiance to a language, i.e. identification with the values, meanings, and identities that the language stands for (Rampton 1995: 336–44).

The early work outlined above is continued in recent more thorough-going re-conceptualization of language and literacy, which we shall turn to in the next section.

### **CRITICAL ISSUES AND TOPICS**

In explaining what he means by translingual literacies, Canagarajah (2013a) provides a historical analysis of how monolingual ideologies are part and parcel of Anglo-European modernity and colonialism of the past four centuries:

Translingual literacies are not about fashioning a new kind of literacy. It is about understanding the practices and processes that already characterize communicative activity in diverse communities. ... Having defined literacy according to monolingual ideologies since modernity, they [scholars] have to now revise their understanding to conceive of literacy as translingual. With hindsight, scholars have now started analyzing how ideologies that territorialized, essentialized, and circumscribed languages came into prominence around enlightenment and romanticism. .... With the colonial enterprise, these ideologies have also migrated to other parts of the world, often imposed as literacies more conducive to science, rationality, development, and civilization, threatening diverse local translingual practices. (Canagarajah 2013a: 2-3)

Canagarajah (2013a, 2013b) proposes the term translingual practice to highlight the point that traditional terms such as bilingual literacy or multilingual literacy still lend themselves too much to the assumption that there exist different linguistic entities with solid or stable boundaries. Instead he wants to highlight translingual *practice* as intrinsic to all human communicative activity, not just in contexts which are traditionally labeled as bilingual or multilingual. Seen in this light, traditionally labeled monolingual literacy is in fact a kind of translingual practice as people draw on a range of styles, genres and registers to achieve their communicative purposes. Canagarajah is not alone in this line of thinking as quite a number of scholars have

recently come up with different terms to capture a similar kind of understanding, e.g., translanguaging (García 2009) and metrolingualism (Pennycook 2010).

Like translingual practice, the notion of heteroglossia focuses on breaking away from the ideology of discrete, unitary languages and breaking through the centralizing forces driven by ideologies of monolingualism and linguistic purism that are dominant in the literature of language education and government language education policies (see critique by Lin 1996, 2006). As pointed out by Lemke (2002):

It is not at all obvious that if they were not politically prevented from doing so, “languages” would not mix and dissolve into one another, but we understand almost nothing of such processes. . . .  
Could it be that all our current pedagogical methods in fact make multilingual development more difficult than it need be, simply because we bow to dominant political and ideological pressures to keep “languages” pure and separate? (Lemke 2002: 85)

Thus, for example, in Singapore, after four decades of linguistic engineering by the state, the once fluid, hybrid, dynamic translingual landscape has changed into one of standardized and compartmentalized “multilingualisms.” Any local translingual practice involving other than the four officially recognized and standardized languages – English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, and Malay – has been formally driven out of all public spheres and educational institutions (Rubdy 2005). This statist engineering or making of artificially compartmentalized languages confirms Bakhtin’s words half a century ago, ‘A unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin 1935/1981: 270).

Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia (“hetero” means “different”; “gloss”: tongue/voice) does not merely mean a combination of different signs and voices. It has a focus on the social tensions and conflicts between these different signs and voices; as Bailey puts it:

Heteroglossia encourages us to interpret the meanings of talk in terms of the social worlds, past and present, of which words are part-and-parcel, rather than in terms of formal systems, such as “languages,” that can veil actual speakers, uses, and contexts. (Bailey 2012: 506)

Bakhtin is convinced that within the boundaries of the same utterance, there can be the free juxtaposition and fruitful dialogic interaction and inter-illumination of diverse voices or points of views on the world (or social languages, styles, ideologies,

different consciousnesses). He writes:

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all “languages” and dialects; there developed the literature of the *fabliaux* and *Schwanke* of street songs, folk sayings, anecdotes, where there was no language-centre at all, where there was to be found a lively play with the “languages” of poets, scholars, monks, knights and others, where all “languages” were masks and where no language could claim to be an authentic, incontestable face.... Heteroglossia, as organized in these low genres, ... was parodic, and aimed sharply and polemically against the official languages of its given time. (Bakhtin 1935/1981: 273)

It is this lively play and inter-illumination of diverse voices and points of views that we shall focus on illustrating in the next section with examples of translingual literacies in the newspaper communicative practice in Hong Kong.

### **MAIN RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES: AN EXAMPLE FROM ANALYZING THE TRANSLINGUAL LITERACY PRACTICES IN HONG KONG NEWSPAPERS**

Since the first Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) government under Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa in 1997, the official language-in-education policy goals have come to be known as ‘biliteracy and trilingualism’ (兩文三語)—the official way of compartmentalizing language and literacy into five different channels (two written ones and three spoken ones). Government resources continue to be put into the education sector, from primary to tertiary, to facilitate the development of abilities to read and write Standard Written Chinese (SWC) and English, and to speak and understand English, Putonghua (the spoken form of SWC) and Cantonese. All students are told and taught that Cantonese is a ‘dialect’, which is not supposed to be used for written communication. As it is natural for children to write the way they speak, Cantonese-specific words (Cantoneisms) are systematically banned and cleansed in students’ writing outputs in schools. Still, exclusion from school literacy does little to stop and stifle the spread and vitality of ‘written Cantonese’ or Cantonese literacy, which figures prominently in the ‘soft’ sections of newspapers and magazines and, to a lesser extent, hard news stories (Li 2000; Shi 2006; Snow 2004). The vitality of written Cantonese is inseparable from the ways the vernacular is used in the region. Until the 1990s, Cantonese emerged as a prestigious ‘dialect’ thanks to the popularity of Hong Kong-based popular culture such as Canto-pop songs, karaoke

products and TV dramas. Even though the golden years of Cantonese popular culture may have subsided following the rise of China as the world's second largest economy, there is no doubt that Cantonese remains the most prestigious of all Chinese 'dialects'.

While water-tight boundaries between Putonghua-based SWC, Cantonese and English are promoted through the institutions of education and examination, literacy practices as gleaned through the SAR's Chinese newspapers and magazines show that people are readily engaged in translanguaging literacies. Below we shall exemplify such practices with the help of one news clipping from *Headline Daily* (頭條日報), a popular tabloid newspaper distributed free of charge and allegedly has the highest circulation in Hong Kong.

In terms of language style, there is a general expectation that the language of formal, hard news stories will adhere to SWC norms only. The same may be said of editorials and features even though, as Shi (2006) has demonstrated, the syntax of Hong Kong Written Chinese (HKWC) exhibits considerable lexico-grammatical influences from English and Cantonese.

1. [headline] 七·一「散步」荷包出血 Dream Bear 捐到「乾塘」\*
2. Kelly 有朋友目擊昔日「頭號梁粉」劉夢熊 Dream Bear 高調現身銅鑼灣 (...)
3. 前全國政協委員劉夢熊嘅日好忙碌，上午出席完慶回歸酒會，下晝兩點半約咗個內地朋友喺柏寧酒店見面。DB 話因為司機放假，要自己搭港鐵落銅鑼灣(...)
4. DB 高調現身，但就澄清唔係去遊行，但話遊行係好事，可以敲響管治者警鐘，仲話個女都有去遊行，唔會反對大家嘅表達方式。CY 上任一年，施政同市民期望有落差，DB 語重心長話：「希望香港明天會更好，唔係明天會更燥！」(...) (Executive 日記, Kelly Chu, H.D. 2013-7-2, p.12)

\*Note: Like SWC, Cantonese is written using logographic Chinese characters as shown above. However, whereas *gaan2 tai2 zi6* 簡體字 'simplified Chinese script' is used in mainland China, under one country, two systems the traditional script *faan4 tai2 zi6* 繁體字 continues to be used in Hong Kong. In addition, some Cantonese morphemes have written representation in Roman script (e.g. *hea*, *he3* 'laid-back' / 'tardy'). JyutPing (粵拼), the transliteration system devised and promoted by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (LSHK), is used to romanize Cantonese morphemes (<http://www.lshk.org/node/31>).

Approximate English translation:

Background: Lew Mon-hung, a former supporter of Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying (popularly referred to in the media as ‘CY’), was seen taking the MTR (Mass Transit Railway) to Causeway Bay, the starting point of the anti-government protest march on July 1, feeding speculation that he wanted to take part in the march. He was also seen donating money to support the anti-government movement.

1. [headline:] July 1 ‘leisurely stroll’ costly Dream Bear donates all he has
2. Kelly has [a] friend[s] who saw former ‘Top supporter of C Y Leung’ Lew Mon-hung Dream Bear appear in Causeway Bay in high profile, (...)
3. Former representative of the Chinese people’s Political Consultative Conference Lew Mon-hung was very busy yesterday; after attending the ‘Return of Sovereignty’ banquet in the morning, [he] went to meet a friend at Park Lane Hotel in Causeway Bay at 2.30pm. DB said because [his] chauffeur was on leave, [he] had to take the MTR (Mass Transit Railway) to Causeway Bay. (...)
4. DB appeared in high profile, but clarified that he was not joining the protest march [on July 1]. He said the protest march was a good thing, for it sounded an alarm bell to the government, adding that his daughter also joined the march, and that he would not be opposed to that. CY [Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying] has been in office for one year; there was a gap between his governance and popular expectation. DB said from his heart: “[I] hope tomorrow will be better, rather than [we will be] more agitated.”

This standing column carries a hybrid title *Executive 日記* (‘Executive Diary’) by *Kelly Chu* (no Chinese name is provided). Readers who are literate in HKWC will recognize that this diary cannot be neatly classified as being written in SWC only or in Cantonese only. In fact the writer draws upon both SWC and Cantonese resources in achieving a local colorful heteroglossic style. The SWC lexical elements are, for example (with English translations in brackets):

- 昔日 (formerly)
- 前全國政協委員 (former representative of the Chinese people’s Political Consultative Conference)
- 語重心長 (speaking from one’s heart)
- 明天會更好 (tomorrow will be better)

However, it should be noted that except for 昔日 (formerly), which seldom appears in spoken Cantonese, all of the other lexical items above may also be found in spoken

Cantonese. It is thus hard to say that these are strictly SWC or Putonghua-specific lexical elements.

On the other hand, Cantonese-specific words are used, as evidenced in Cantonese grammatical markers and lexical items such as the following:

- perfective aspect marker: zo2 咗 (約咗 ‘made an appointment’),
- preposition: hai2 喺 (喺柏寧酒店 ‘at Park Lane Hotel’),
- verb-to-be: hai6 係 (係好事, ‘is a good thing’),
- negator: m4 唔 (唔係去遊行, ‘not going to protest march’; 唔係明天會更燥 ‘tomorrow will not be more agitated’; 唔會反對 ‘will not be opposed to’)
- genitive marker: ge3 嘅 (大家嘅表達方式 ‘our mode of expression’)

In addition, there are many other Cantonese-specific expressions and idioms which would make this column partially obscure to non-Cantonese-speaking readers, for instance:

- zam4 jat6 疍日 ‘yesterday’ (SWC equivalent: zok3 yat6 昨日)
- haa6 zau3 下晝 ‘afternoon’ (SWC equivalent: haa6 m5 下午)
- zung6 仲 ‘also’ (zung6 waa6 仲話, SWC equivalent: waan4 syut3 還說)
- waa6 話 ‘say’ (used four times; SWC equivalent: syut3 說)
- daap3 gong2 tit3 搭港鐵 ‘take the MTR’ (SWC equivalent: zo6 gong2 tit3 坐港鐵)
- loeng4 fan2 梁粉 ‘Leung fan/supporter’, 粉 being the first syllable of the bisyllabic lexical borrowing fan2 si1 粉絲 ‘fans’ (SWC equivalent: zi1 ci4 ze3 支持者); there is also an unmistakable touch of humor as loeng4 fan2 is homophonous with 涼粉 ‘chilled jelly’, a popular street delicacy in the Pearl River Delta region to counter the scorching summer heat

Other Cantonese-specific features include the use of Cantonese hyperbolic idioms in the headline:

- ho4 baau1 ceot1 hyut3 荷包出血, literally ‘purse bleeding’
- gon1 tong4 乾塘, literally ‘pond drying up’

both alluding to Lew being obliged to donate money to support the protest march.

Of all the linguistic features, however, perhaps none is more eye-catching than the use



of English as an additional resource to capture some of the interesting meanings which would otherwise be lost in a ‘pure’ SWC or ‘pure’ Cantonese rendition. These include reference to the Chief Executive as ‘CY’ (pronounced as ‘C Y’), the literal translation of the bisyllabic given name of the newsmaker Lew Mon-hung, ‘Dream Bear’ (used three times, including in a photo caption), which is then abbreviated as ‘DB’ (used three times in the extract). Such examples of translingual literacy practice reinforce the language use pattern in this standing column (*Executive 日記*) as well as the trilingual identity of the columnist who identifies herself as *Kelly Chu*. They also suggest that the language norms being adhered to are clearly more characteristic of those of heteroglossic orality, rather than those of ‘proper’ compartmentalized monolingual school literacy. The language use pattern as exemplified in this column is also indicative of a trend in informal social interaction and written e-communication among educated Chinese Hongkongers (Li 2011). Similar examples of translingual literacy practice may be found in many adverts collected in 2013, especially the attention-grabber or slogan such as the following:

- (5) 至 **fit** 安全 駕駛 大 行動  
 zit3 fit on1 cyun4 gaa3 sai2 daai6 hang4 dung6  
 most fit safe drive big action  
 ‘The most fit and safe big drive action’ (API, Transport Department)
- (6) 原來 老花 都 可以 戴 **Con**  
 jyun4 loi4 lou5 faa1 dou1 ho2 ji5 daai3 con  
 so presbyopia also can wear contact lens  
 ‘So [people with] presbyopia can also wear contact lens’ (CIBA Vision)
- (7) **KILL** 新 **BILL**  
 kill san1 bill  
 ‘kill new bill(s)’ (PPS payment system)

Apart from newspaper columns and adverts, the heteroglossic vernacular-driven writing style is also very common in other ‘soft’ sections such as infotainment news stories and comic strips.

### **Fluid and porous boundaries**

The fluidity or ‘mixing’ of elements from apparently discrete languages and registers as exemplified in a standing column of a Hong Kong Chinese newspaper above is by no means a linguistic novelty. The language use patterns of ‘soft’ sections of Hong Kong Chinese newspapers are similarly characterized by the mobilization of linguistic

resources from various sources: Classical Chinese, Standard Written Chinese, Cantonese, and English. Made popular by a few Chinese columnists since the 1950s, such a writing style has been called: *saam1 kap6 dai2* 三及第 ‘mixing of elements from three discrete styles: Classical Chinese, Standard Written Chinese, and Cantonese’ and this style has won the hearts of many readers (or ‘Like’ in the Facebook era) who appreciate the subtle nuances and humour conveyed successfully by such a fluid performance through the mobilization of multiple linguistic resources (Wong 2002) to juxtapose multiple social views and voices. This trend has continued since the 1970s; to make meaning creatively, skillful writers who are trilingual in Cantonese, SWC and English would draw on the semiotic potential of elements from their whole linguistic repertoire, which is treated as a composite pool of resources rather than as compartmentalized languages or registers. Such a style is also found in newspapers which are more characteristic of the ‘quality’ press. This is not surprising given that, as in speech, writers of ‘soft’ sections of newspapers and magazines tend to shape their vernacular-based language use pattern to appeal to the stylistic preference of their readers (Bell 1991). From the point of view of marketability, it seems that the survival of Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong hinges on how ready they are to exploit this translingual, heteroglossic writing style.

In ideological terms, the above examples from Hong Kong illustrate an interesting contrast between, on the one hand, official school literacy norms and standardness which are perpetuated through education institutions, and on the other hand, non-school literacy practices in local newspapers and magazines where such norms and standardness are patently ignored. This is so largely because, for decades, in a highly audience-sensitive and market-driven press industry, Cantoneisms and other linguistic features which are characteristic of the heteroglossic vernacular style have found social space to thrive, allowing trilingual writers to exercise their individual agency in defiance of top-down linguistic standards. Hong Kong thus offers an interesting case where multivoicedness expressed through rich colorful discursive acts, along with linguistic creativity which knows no boundaries, is able to grow and flourish in the ‘soft’ sections of Hong Kong newspapers and magazines.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

What translingual literacies look like and why bi/multilingual literacies need to be reconceptualized so as to capture the fluid, heteroglossic, non-compartmentalized nature of literacies remain important research questions. For instance, the new translingual literacies emerging in new media communication remain a rich field to be

described and explored. How do these translingual literacies resemble or differ from traditional print translingual literacies (as shown above, for example, in the translingual practices of Hong Kong newspapers)? What are the kinds of fluid and at times contradictory identities being negotiated in such practices? What are the different social voices and points of views being brought together to ‘dialogize’ each other in the same stretch of text? Do we need to adapt our traditional linguistic, pragmatic and literacy analysis tools in order to furnish a better analysis of such translingual literacy practices? All these require the collaborative research efforts of both linguists and heteroglossia/sociocultural theorists. In short, as we ponder directions for future research, what is needed seems to be more linguistic/literacy analysis that is heteroglossically sensitive and socioculturally aware.

## RELATED TOPICS

translanguaging, heteroglossia, translingual practice  
lexical transference, phonetic borrowing

## FURTHER READING

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