

Foreword

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Pages xxiii–xxvi of

Multilingual Literacies: Reading and writing different worlds

Edited by Marilyn Martin-Jones and Kathryn E. Jones

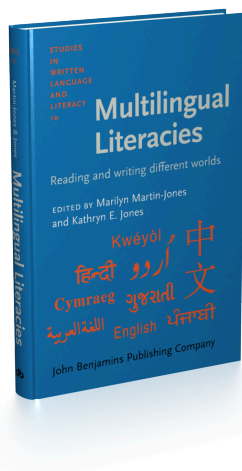
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Foreword

David Barton

It is worth pausing for a while and considering the title of this book, *Multilingual Literacies: Reading and Writing Different Worlds*. The title and the sub-title indicate two important complementary themes, firstly that our understanding of literacies can be furthered by examining multilingual contexts, and, secondly, that the study of multilingual communities can be enhanced by examining the significance of reading and writing. These two directions of influence, that multilingualism sheds light on literacy and that literacy sheds light on multilingualism, are themes throughout the book.

This is a very rich volume. It is a unique collection of studies of multilingual language use, primarily in urban communities in Britain. Each study has its own importance and is making its own particular points. These topics are brought together in the introductory chapter and the section introductions. As well as emphasising the situatedness and the particularities of literacy practices, each study is also making statements about the nature of literacy and about the dynamics of bilingual communities and how they are held together by literate activity. As Marilyn Martin-Jones and Kathryn Jones point out in the introduction, the fields of bilingualism and literacy have somewhat different intellectual histories with distinct theoretical framings and methodological approaches. The excitement of this book is in bringing together these fields, in finding commonalities and in creating new directions. The work reported here brings together studies in Britain, as well as complementing studies of literacy in minority communities in the United States (Moss 1994; Perez 1998) and historical studies of literacy in bilingual situations (Boyarin 1992).

For me, as someone who has worked mainly in literacy studies, the framing provided by multilingualism has enabled me to see many issues in a new light and to see ways in which the understanding of reading and writing can develop. As a starting-point in this, these are a set of studies of language in

everyday life. Attention to detail seems to me to be an important common factor in these diverse studies with varied approaches and methodologies, attention to the detail of the dynamics of language use in people's lives. This is the detail of how parents actually help children learn languages, how people switch between using different written languages in systematic ways, how people change their literacy practices during their lives, and much more. It is this detail which is needed to inform and enrich theories of language use. Equally important, such detail is needed to inform public views and government policies.

Whilst much literacy research and bilingualism research has been concerned with children and schooling, one particular strength of this book is the way in which it studies the activities of both children and adults and the way it juxtaposes research in schools and out of schools. The work on children is always contextualised by considerations of adults' practices, and activities within education are considered in relation to everyday activities. This positioning of educational practice means that the research can contribute to fundamental questions about the changing nature of schooling being posed in Britain and other industrialised countries. School learning is firmly located in children's lives, with the importance of family and community support clearly recognised.

Research on bilingualism raises many questions for the field of literacy studies to address. Crucially the research demonstrates that bilingualism is not something to be added on to literacy studies, creating some secondary area of research, something of marginal significance; rather it is central. Bilingualism research provides concepts, phenomena and ways of researching for all literacy research. Inevitably, the fusion of the two fields also changes them inescapably and provides new avenues for research. There are phenomena which help us understand monolingual and multilingual homes and communities equally, such as the role of grand parents and other family members, the importance of mediation of activities by others, how literate practices are not just to do with reading and writing, the relation of researcher and researched.

One concept which is changed by the fusion of bilingualism research and literacy research is the notion of community. Research starting out from spoken language tends to emphasise interactions which are face-to-face and in the same place: consequently, communities are usually thought of as physical locations. Fusing literacy research and bilingualism research provides a more complex picture. Literacy enables us to see that communities can be held

together by literate practices, not just by face-to-face interaction and physical location. Literacy creates textually mediated worlds and different forms of community. To give an example, in our research in Lancaster (Barton & Hamilton 1998), in a predominantly monolingual community, there were bilingual people, including several speakers of Gujarati, some of Polish, and some of French. They all lived in the same physical neighbourhood and some of their activities related to the neighbourhood and to relations with neighbours. Other activities, such as the religious activities of the Gujarati speakers, revolved around communities of interests and were not identified with the physical location of the neighbourhoods in which the people lived. Literacy was important in sustaining these dispersed activities. Reading and writing provide a powerful way in which communities of interest are held together; and other technologies are likely to create new notions of community.

There is a second way in which the notion of community can develop. Communities are seen as physical; they are also seen as minority, and often bounded by minority language use. However, it is also important to research dominant and mainstream practices in the same ways, with the same theories and the same methodologies, seeing how they are located in communities of interest. This point is similar to the principle of *symmetry* articulated by Pardoe (2000) in relation to student writing. We would see that many of the dynamics of minority communities apply to mainstream communities, and that the dynamics of multilingual interaction throw light upon monolingual interaction. The arguments, models and theories in this book are applicable to all language research.

David Barton, Lancaster,
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