Towards Asian Pacific Perspectives: Challenges and Issues in Multicultural/lingual Contexts
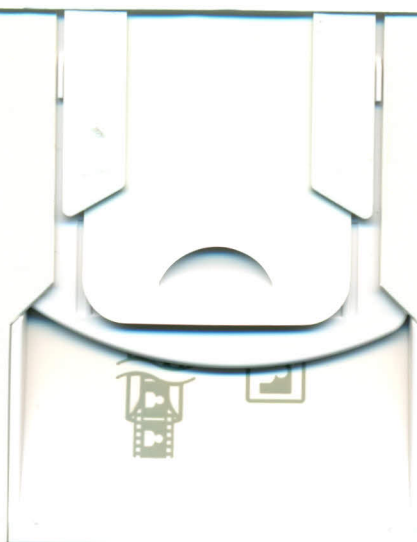
The Editor

Considering Asian Pacific ontology and epistemology from a multicivilisational perspective: Continuities and changes

There is perhaps a need to examine the local, regional and globalising worlds, the overlapping worlds to which we belong within the overarching space of Asian Pacific thought, not neglecting the best of universal thought as the heritage of a common humanity. There is a need to critically examine the changes and continuities in the Asia Pacific in terms of language issues, identifying contemporary issues and challenges with a view of the future. In this regard, the 3L Journal is interested in contributions which theoretically and conceptually draw upon the major civilisational thought and cultures of the region including the Hindu-Buddhistic, Islamic and the Confucian/Taoist, situating them within Asia Pacific contexts. In considering Asian Pacific ontology and epistemology, Ooi Kee Beng's article is an intriguing attempt to consider a way of looking, which is based but not limited to Asian Pacific thought, and contexts. His contribution is an original example of the way in which the Asia Pacific might interrogate the East in search of theoretical models with which to view contemporary issues. In this stimulating paper, he has attempted to describe and establish relevance of ancient civilisational concepts in relation to language and knowledge creation (Ooi, 2001). One could perhaps consider the ways in which the dominant paradigms offered in the developed First World may be appropriated or reappropriated for the Asia Pacific in terms of local, and regional and planetary (beyond global) purposes. Appropriation and recontextualisation in relation to the ancient past, the colonial past (where relevant) and with a clear vision of the future is a crucial question confronting this region. How does one adopt the best of Western rational thought and science whilst engaging those ancient civilizational wisdom from the Asia Pacific to provide more holistic answers to the questions confronting our society?

More fundamentally, we could perhaps consider and present a way of looking, a way of being which is drawn from but not limited to Asian Pacific thought, and contexts. This is has to be examined within the broader contexts of local, regional, global struggles in social, political, cultural, economic and spiritual spaces over resources, capital, people, meaning-making rights and representations (including language, communication, semiotics). In particular, the challenges and issues specific to this space include patriarchy, environment, communications technology, media, global capitalism, labour movement, migration, religious fundamentalism and social issues like alienation, and loss of human agency.

A multi-civilisational perspective: Hegemonic discourses and the perceived loss of human agency

Many of us seem crippled by the circumstances of our time – hegemonic and dominant discourses of globalising structures/processes, mass media, consumerism, commodification and technologisation. Many of us may feel that we cannot do anything about this and we are told that we are disempowered. We are often told that we need to loose our ideals, we are often told that we need to surrender agency to the powers that be and that we need to give up choices, the risks otherwise being just too great for an individual or for a community. I believe that we must reject the globalising, local and regional fatalism that "powerful individuals or systems on various levels and in various forms tell us. We must not accept a 'it just is' fatalism, losing the political will and human agency to transform structures and processes of domination, with a reflexive and critical Asian Pacific perspective.
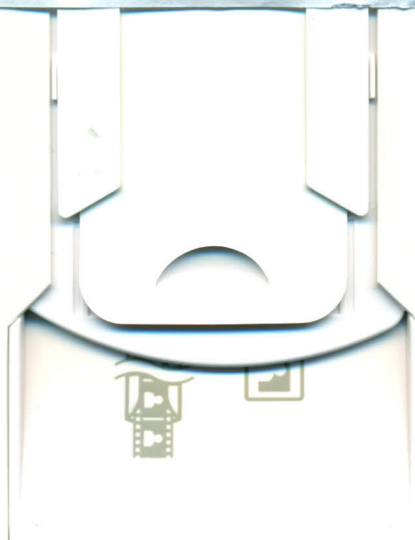
In the Asia Pacific, we do have the lived histories and experiences of multicivilisations (Wang, 2001) and the multicultural/lingual resources to draw upon which date from ancient times. Together with human and political will in interaction with creativity, conscience, and universal ethics we can make socially aware decisions to build a better space. Of perhaps some interest here, is how critical discourse can be appropriated within an Asian Pacific multi-civilisational perspective to provide ways of thinking-acting on issues of ethnicity, human rights, gender, sexuality and labour.

Being mindful of the benefits, the risks and consequences of reflexive continuity or change, both collectively and individually, we could perhaps make conscious political decisions to bring about a better space committed toward peace, social equity and justice, however difficult the negotiation through pluralistic discourses would be. Through enhanced awareness and dialogue, we can in turn be empowered to shape discourses and the language of such discourses, collectively and personally.

Intercultural language, communication and discourse for awareness and participation in various heterogenous spaces

This journal is a space committed to exploring thought and research into language and communication practices as being formative of social and cultural lives. This possibly to an extent draw upon language, communication and discourse studies including interactionally based studies addressing identity, conflict, ambivalence and reconciliation in families, organizations, technology, education, politics and civil peace movements. An intercultural perspective will consider the inter-spaces and intra-spaces between choices of identities and discourses, made according to the multiple, and interpenetrating and/or conflicting contexts viz. ethnicity, gender, spirituality/religion, nationality, globality, among others. Intercultural language and communication could look for example, at the interspaces between the multiple identities and discourses of meaning-makers. Their practices may include the reflexive awareness of the choices, benefits, risks and consequences of particular identities and discourses. A broad intercultural view could perhaps engage Asian Pacific peoples in dialogues within an across ethnic, gender, spiritual, religious and sociocultural spaces as well as nation-state and globalising structures in the increasingly heterogeneous spaces they now inhabit.

In this regard, Thilaga and Manjit's paper offers a pithy study on the ways in which the meaningmakers in the multiethnic, multicultural Malaysian classroom reveal rich variation in terms of collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Chang Zhonglin's article on intercultural and literary studies provides penetrating insights on the interspaces between cultural contexts and literary understanding from the viewpoint of Chinese readers and native British readers of literatures in English. Both papers point to the need for more engaged work on the intercultural and multicultural dimensions of language, communication in interaction with cultures of ethnicity, gender, education and life-experiences.

Language and gender issues in the Asia Pacific

There is the rising challenge to look at gender within the histories, civilisational wisdom and contemporary contexts of the Asia Pacific. There is the need to look at non-essentialist views of gender when mediating Western liberal and humanistic-gender theories within current Asia Pacific scenarios of continuity in dominant hierarchies of patriarchy in old-new forms, religious fundamentalism, and comodification of women and children in local-global contexts, socialisation of men and the young into dominant patriarchial hierarchies. Scholars in this region are generally agreed that they need to theorise about and conceptualise theories on gender in ways which are that are ecologically resonant for our contexts, a marriage of perspectives from competing discourses. Admittedly, this process especially between dominant continous and discontinous discourses would involve complex and very difficult negotiations over definitions, ways of seeing and implementation. In the South East Asian context, it would seem that grassroots and activist movements are admirably, leading the way in terms of innovative thinking in relation to gender which scholars should be more cognizant of. More significantly, these civil movements constantly declare the need to consider issues of gender in relation to race and class which are seen more powerfully as in a web-like relationship and for such discrimination to be acted against in an complementary manner.

Wan Roselezam in this volume draws upon Malaysian literature to provide a stimulating and sharp theoretical gaze into patriarchy from a literary and gender cultural perspective. Haque and Wong interestingly explores within a pragmatics based gender research the use of tag questions within a tertiary setting in Malaysia.

Multicultural/lingual speakers of English as meaning-makers and producers of knowledge in local-regional-global spaces

If an Asian Pacific perspective is sought, we may need to situate dominant civilizational discourses here in relationship to English as a 'second and/or foreign language', challenging the thinking around this conventional naming of English. Scholars may need to reflexively consider re-naming the users of the English Language as the appropriators-mediators of English within a multilingual setting. Instead of the terms ESL or EFL perhaps we could use an ecologically aware term, English as used by multicultural/lingual peoples (English as used by multicultural/lingual speakers - EuMS). In other words, English in the Asia Pacific may be viewed as a code within the existing pluralistic repertoire of language codes, which existed before the arrival of English. In other words multiculturalism/lingualism could be redefined using the perspectives of multicultural/lingual communicators as a point of departure, among others. Within this broad perspective, we may then identify the pluralistic roles of some Asia Pacific communicators, those who are able to move purposefully and fluidly between languages and cultural spaces including English dominant ones as well as in the civilisational languages/cultures of the Asia. The perspective is one in which English is gazed upon as one alongside the living languages in this region, English being important for particular purposes. This is to allow for the continued rights of civilisational languages to exist and to be sustained within the ecology of their contexts, a very difficult struggle indeed as individuals, communities, nation and global-states unproblematically conform to the 'hierarchy of languages' and arguably, privileging English as an 'international' language.

It is in this light that we need to cast the Asian Pacific communicator in terms of the local-regional cultural and linguistic resources with English as language for international communication in specific spaces.
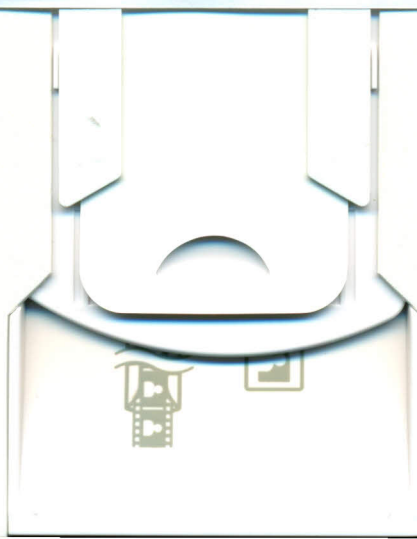
In terms of the intellectual property building rights of the peoples of the Asia Pacific, the recognition of the multicultural/lingual resources available within its communities, albeit unevenly distributed, is significant especially within the possibilities of participatory and sustainable economies and societies (Sullivan, 2001) where collective knowledge creation and identity representation is pivotal. Within the clearly contested complex of multiple local-global spaces and the trajectory of sharing stemming from largely collectivist societies where knowledge was traditionally seen as being cumulative and socially shared to privilege larger community interests, the question of intellectual property rights may itself be questioned and turned on its head by the Asia Pacific. Increasingly there is evidence of resistance by planetary thinkers and activists to excessive and unsustainable economic globalisation which over-privileges the First World and its ways of being, its ways of thinking.

This has to a certain extent been done by examining language use and learning within the intersecting discourses of identity, linguistic rights of community, nation-building, ecology, globalisation and planetary survival. In this regard, Singh and Scanlon's article in this volume offers an interesting perspective on the complicated conjunction of language, economy, ecology, society and ethics. At the same time, Lee Su Kim in a rich ethnographic study examines the voices and identities of multicultural learners, describing the ways in which English is creatively appropriated by multicultural/lingual learners of English Malaysia. Tony Hung in an erudite article discusses the appropriation of non-native varieties of languages including Cantonese and English by non-native speakers using *'Pygmalion'* as a point of departure. He raises contemporary sociolinguistic and educational issues within multilingual contexts focusing on the role of accent in defining social class. At the same time, Inyang Imudofot provides a textured account of the variation in terms of stress and rhythm amongst Nigerian speakers of English, again demonstrating the dynamic recontextualisation of languages by meaning-makers and communicators.

Language, communication and education in multicultural/lingual societies: Changes and continuities

The Asia Pacific is a region with a rapidly growing and relatively younger population. Education remains a key challenge and issue. In this respect, the empowerment of the younger generation and the continous learning of the worker-citizen is crucial. Not least are the issue of access and equity to the dispositions, multiliteracies, competences and skills required in the shifting contexts of the local, regional and the global within diversity and difference.

There is the imminent challenge in education to consider more fully the multi-languages and cultures of the Asia Pacific in relation to local-global goals and agendas and purposes. This would perhaps provide for more coherent links between important purposes, processes and pathways allowing for to allowing for a greater of access, appropriation and transformation of the meanings of multicultural peoples especially in the creation of knowledge for holistic and integrated lives. Among others, a multicultural/lingual framework could be a point of departure for education, one which values the ontology and epistemic resources of multicultural meaning-makers, as serious material, cultural, social and economic and human capital (Bordieu, 1984), not least in terms of conscientising gatekeepers, policy-makers, activists and meaning-makers regarding the valuing of diversity and the transformation of diversity into human resources and/or capital especially to learners seeking active participation in social, civil, academic and professional work. These epistemic resources are crucial within the broad repertoire of their intercultural awareness and communication practices. This is particularly important especially for those who continue to remain largely
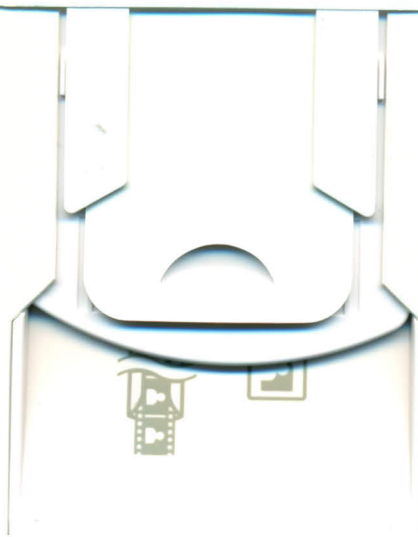
outside of dominant discourses and who are alienated and disenfranchised from society because of ethnicity, linguistic, class, gender, ideological and political factors. In this respect, Ibrahim's paper on competences in content-based ESL learning situated within a tertiary context in Malaysia provides a vital pedagogic strand for language education in terms of content based ESL instruction. Ibrahim's identifiable competences through teacher talk provides a valuable description for access especially to learners seeking active participation in academic work. These competences are crucial within the broad repertoire of intercultural awareness and communication practices which have become even more significant in social, academic and work spaces where participants need to interact effectively within diversity and difference.

A broader-based education is a challenge for our communities. Some scholars have begun re-examining the inherited and extant multi-literacies within the Asia Pacific in relation to the newer literacies required to satisfy changing requirements for the local, regional and global international spaces. Through this process, the Asia Pacific may offer its own view of what multiliteracies or perhaps, pluriliteracies (Koo, 2003b) would mean in multicultural/lingual contexts. My own view is that among others, the spiritual heritage of communities here may offer an enriched perspective of multiliteracies as in relation to this innovative framework as offered hitherto by First World educators, whose points of reference have been largely Western rationalist (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). The Asia Pacific is a region with a strong ancient and modern history of religion and spirituality, where communities have tended to employ holistic perspectives towards life issues. It is important to establish and examine these ancient wisdoms in identifying values and ethics that we may use to mediate dominant and hegemonic discourses for example, those from media.

Language is but one modality amongst other modes of communication. Developments in ICT have rendered the visual a vitally important modality for communication. This affects our communication and representations. Asian Pacific communities have strong established visual cultures including its evolved traditions of mythology, iconography, symbolism and cosmology (Sabapathy, 1998). These offer rich meaning-making possibilities for the region. How do we look beyond the hitherto dominant verbal paradigm coming from Western history and ontology of the verbal script, a paradigm which may be arguably, overly emphasized in conventional schooling and learning institutions, thereby neglecting what may otherwise have been resources especially for the visual or multimodal communicator-learner? How then do we build continous interfaces between visual and verbal literacies within the broader literate traditions and cultures of the region? How do we discontinuously transform literacies so that we continue to be relevant for changing times, whilst maintaining vital continuous links with the past for our cultural identity, sense of place and voice?

Yuen Kheng Seng working creatively within the interpenetrating spaces of design, art, philosophy and education, has in a thoughtful cover design to this volume shown how meaning-makers within a multicultural context can draw-write pluralistic multimodal designs through a reflexive hybridization of the verbal with the visual, the universal with the local. Drawing from this example, it seems possible to look at ways of envisioning education in its fuller sense in the Asia Pacific, a region where history has shown indigenisation processes through continous and discontinous choices in politics, art, language and culture.

Asia Pacific communities could perhaps reclaim the cultural wealth of the region in terms of its meaning-making possibilities and the transformation of these into symbolic and economic capital, within the hegemonic discourses of the global and the call of the planetary. This collection of papers has to a certain extent, recognized the situated contexts, history, philosophy, resources and languages within the Asia Pacific.

The contributors here situated across the Asia Pacific have provided through their theories, methodology and analysis a reflexive awareness of the meaning-making possibilities already engaged in or potentially engage-able. I see these papers as providing beginnings into diverse and holistic ways of looking, involving the imaginery, economic, ethical and material. The papers have considered in different ways the possibilities present in the dynamics of reflexive changes and continuities, in the shaping of the future of the Asia Pacific. The Journal looks forward to more dialogues which are concerned with developing perspectives for Asia Pacific's transforming futures.

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