

**The Socio-Political Aspects of Language Teaching,  
Linguistics and Literature:  
Examining the Third Space of Meanings in Language Use and Learning**

The Editor

This issue is aimed primarily at exploring the socio-political aspects of language teaching, linguistics and literature, drawing upon a range of disciplinary fields including philosophy, economics, politics, education, communications, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural and political studies, development studies and area studies. The socio-political necessarily considers power relationships in language teaching, linguistics and literature. The sociopolitical aspect of language teaching examines entrenched ideologies, institutions, systems, structures, processes and cultural ways of being-believing-saying-doing-performing, as well as practices of domination-coercion which are constituted and represented both overtly and subtly in and through language.

In this regard, scholars especially those working from a postmodern perspective and critical theory have examined the third spaces of meaning, aporia, conjunction, coordinations of discourses (Gee, 1996) including sites of hegemony-counter-hegemony, appropriation-reappropriation, contestations and alterity, continuity-discontinuity and tradition-renewal-transformation. Points of inquiry include slippages, interstices and erasures on various interacting levels and domains wherein socio-political phenomena may be examined. Issues include those involving conflict, tensions, paradoxes, ambivalence in sites of contestation and alterity, situational and imposed identities, standardised and hybrid discourses and indigenised and enforced literacies that pose challenges to language teaching, linguistics and literature. Specifically, in terms of the meanings, functions and consequences of English language learning in multilingual/cultural spaces, tensions and contradictions emerge in the sites and domains of language and learning, which are deeply socio-political spaces. The interactions and contestations between the global, regional and the local on various intersecting levels involving for example, questions of ethnicity and language choice-use are viewed by some as a conjunction of trajectories involving struggles and coercion over identities, coercion-agency in hegemonic-pluralist discourses involving submitting subjects and/or fluid subjects in contestation.

The socio-political aspect of language teaching, linguistics and literature would certainly have to engage with non-essentialist concepts of culture and meanings specifically, the question of cultural constitution, cultural reproduction and the transformation of the subject and discourse of meanings through structures of reproduction. This would include looking at schools, tertiary institutions, nation-states, global structures, technologies, communication-media and bureaucracy as sites of

reproduction and at the same time, examine alternatives for meanings and imagination offered by non-institutionalised sites like the everyday (Highmore, 2002) and civil society, among others. Specifically, the sociopolitical dimension of language teaching problematises the agents, structures and processes that determine meanings, functions and consequences of discourses. For example, socio-political inquiries problematise the structures and processes of knowledge production and the subject of knowing is looked at in terms of postcolonial and area studies and in terms of the heterogenous and dynamic responses of subaltern subjects and communities. Postmodern critiques provide a relativist critique to grand narratives offered in the name of autonomous and decontextualised notions of progress. The complex relations between language and perspectives on external realities offer an intriguing site for examining the social political in language use and learning.

### **Construction, consumption and contestations of English as an international language**

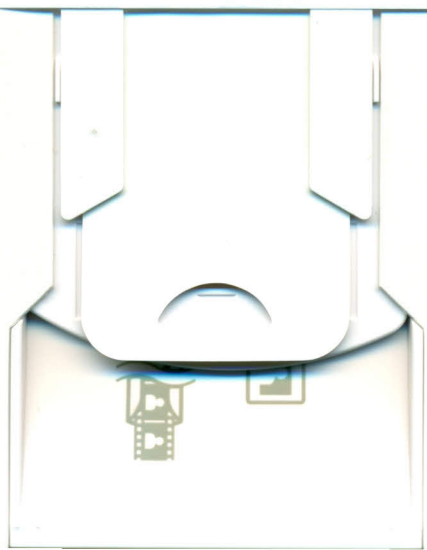
The article by Gregory Hadley provides a lively debate on the role of history, power and ideology in the construction and consumption of English as an international language. Hadley sees his paper as helping teachers make informed decisions regarding their role in the teaching of English. The author argues that the language ideology of modernity places unproblematised legitimacy on scientific and printed language, thereby demoting the status of and marginalizing languages that fall outside of these fixed and circumscribed categories of standards, as defined by powerful nations and hegemonic corporations. He questions the continued systematic oppression of voices and languages that are constructed as Other, often in the name of authorized knowledge, production, pragmatism and neoliberal economics. Hadley argues for the right of other languages and other varieties of languages in contestation to that of international English. The ecology of living language constitutes the heritage and cultures of communities and they have been endangered by the hegemony of standard languages. It is important that English, if it is worth risking in terms of benefits that it arguably brings, should at the same time be contested as a language in interaction with the living languages of communities with rights of representation and within a web of sustainable economies, cultures and spiritualities.

The issues raised here bear relevance for multicultural contexts, communities and individuals who are pluricultural, multiply affiliated to a conjunction of the personal, the communal, the national and the global. This involves primary as well as secondary life-worlds of work, education and social life and cultures which have emerged from such pluralist contexts. For example, the Malaysian English (ME) speech community is the hybridised product and process of such contexts. How then do we view the sociolinguistically and culturally agile ME pluricultural speaker who is able to fluidly move in and between subjectivities to key into a conjunction of space/s through the

use of various languages, their sub-varieties, styles and register in terms of the workplace, education and society? However, he/she may not speak the standard 'international English' as defined by institutions and gatekeepers of the Inner Circles of ELT. It is in this regard that there is a need to rethink hegemonic and monolithic 'standard' norms of English, relative to contexts and purposes of speech communities.

### **ELT in China: A conjunction of the local-global and shifting paradigms within education and society**

Chang Zong Lin's article in this volume highlights the complexities of importing unmediated ideas of CLT from the Inner Circle of the English Language world. He problematises the unthinking importation of ELT ideologies, views and practices from the Inner Circle by local Chinese academics and writers at first, unaware of the important mediation work necessary to meet their students at the chalk face within the contexts of the transitions, which modern China is facing. Importantly, Chang Zong Lin situates his discussion with an implied awareness of the fashion cycles from first worlds of knowledge. He hints at the risk and dangers of unreflective adoption from first worlds of knowledge in language teaching which are unsituated in local knowledges and histories of practice in ELT and in education, specifically. He provides examples of contested visions of what is appropriate for ELT in China locating his discussion in terms of appropriacy of ELT for audience, purpose, domain and contexts within a continuity and change perspective. The paper poses challenges on how 21st century China would have to interface international and global English approaches after decades of ELT in structuralist frameworks and more recently, communicative approaches. Dominant paradigms of ELT have to be interfaced with diverse cultures of learning and teaching in contexts and domains in China. He argues for the agentive appropriation of ELT by speakers outside of inner circle English Language 'native speaker' context. His paper provides a path of inquiry for the sociopolitical dimension in ELT which, clearly involves changing political paradigms, radically changed economic and social contexts which have impacted on the functions, meanings and use of English for contemporary China. This I see to be an indication of a powerful awareness involving the reflexive consideration of diverse ways of meaning in third spaces of possible accommodations and adaptations, representing other ways of seeing (ontology) and other ways of knowing (epistemology). The awareness of the discourse processes involved in linguistic and socio-political and cultural appropriation of discourses as pathways for the forging of knowledges has indeed been explored through frameworks engaging in pluralistic subjectivities, power, consequences and risks in language choice and use.



### **Broadcast Talk: The conjunction of nation-state agendas of development, multiculturalism, gender and moral behavior**

In a paper situated in discourse analysis, Lee Siew Chin argues that broadcast talk in Malaysia is institutionalized sociopolitical talk. She discusses this in relation to what she presents as dominantly acceptable norms of behaviour in public interaction sanctioned by the nation-state. She argues that broadcast embeds and reflects the dominant sociopolitical agendas and values of the public media. In turn, broadcast talk reproduces and engenders the acceptability of this type of talk for public consumption. Lee lays out how topics, talk goals and agendas are systematically aligned in discursive talk involving issues of gender, multicultural interaction, moral behaviour and political concerns of the nation-state in the Malaysian public domain of broadcasting in what she sees to be a media-controlled multiethnic nation, with notions of what is acceptable for public talk. She posits that 'broadcast talk in Malaysia tends to promote the socio-political ends of the nation.' The question which may be posed is how readers and the audience can adopt a reflexive and critical stance towards the socio-political constructedness of broadcast talk in relation to personal, and public appropriations of meaning to pluralise dominant understandings of ethnicity, gender rights, moral and ethical behaviour beyond those sanctioned by the nation-state. As Malaysia moves towards political maturity, it is perhaps worthwhile risking liberal politics from what is now described as a situation of illiberal politics (Jomo, 2000) to one providing for open-ness in talk and interaction including broadcast talk.

### **A conjunction of change and continuity: Academic writing in ELT in Australia**

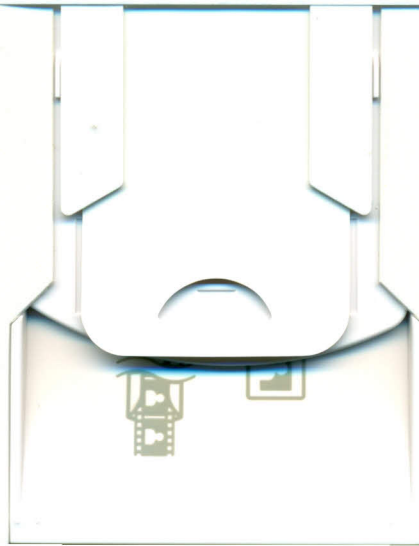
Around the globe, schools and universities and the societies within which they are located are confronting radical changes. Public education including universities are faced with challenges including those of technologisation, regionalisation, migratory and flexible workers, neoliberal politics-economics, capital flows, global politics, commodification of education, internationalisation-regionalisation of education, and militarisation and religious fundamentalism. Complex and contradictory challenges from the global, regional and the local have required dynamic responses from the educational community in all parts of the world. Dawson's article on academic writing in ELT is contextualised within the confluence of such complex challenges and the transitions between paradigms of change. She has described what may be viewed as an attempt to confront the complex site within which academic writing is situated. Her contribution in this volume provides insights as to how academic writing now situated within the complex intersections of corporatisation, global international movements of learners-workers, education and training is renegotiated in changing times and spaces. Dawson shows an illustrative case of how her community has negotiated and indeed transformed a space for academic writing within these trajectories of change.

Academic writing is transformed within sites of transition involving workplace requirements and standards, corporatisation of universities as cost centres, access and equity considerations, and traditional paradigms of elitism vs. access paradigms, with learners having to engage in diverse primary and secondary life-worlds. Among others, readers may pose questions about the plurality of discourses that learners have to engage in, and the complex multicultural and transnational contexts that learners have to negotiate. The question arises as to how educationists should respond to this diversity and difference in inclusive terms incorporating systems of learning, cultures of learning and pathways of learning. As situated theorists-practitioners, readers may confront paradoxes in education engaging the global and the international whilst negotiating the local, in the domains of the workplace, the classroom and civil society.

### **Appropriating the socio-political in everyday life: The invisible acts of praxis**

Perhaps readers interested in the socio-political may wish to look at the everyday life (Highmore, 2002) and the micro politics of language and culture as alternative perspectives on language teaching, literature beyond the hegemonic macro-narratives of nation-state, big media, knowledge production of major publishing houses and flows of capital from privileged worlds without and within their contexts. The sociopolitical in the everyday life of communities in the Asia Pacific is, arguably, an important site. Is there not already an unreported silent but active 'civil society' in language teaching, linguistics and literature which is largely 'invisible' and remains uncommodified, doing important work that is unwritten, unpublished and unacknowledged in dominant discourses?

Teaching goes on everyday, perhaps as a commitment of praxis, an act of personal governance by a school teacher teaching Tamil in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur alongside Bahasa Malaysia and English, an outback teacher sustaining indigenous languages in Queensland, an English Language lecturer teaching English in interaction with mother-tongue languages in Heilongjiang, China. My point about the invisible work of unacknowledged teachers at the chalk face is not in any way to discount the importance of overt, systematic and published contestations over the meanings, functions and use of power and ideology in language teaching. However, it points to the crucial need to recognise the invisible and important ongoing ground level teaching at the chalk face, the commitment of many unknown language teachers and activists, exercising civil 'governance' despite the hegemonic calls of globalising education, media, publishing houses and ISO's. There are teachers, activists and researchers who deliberately choose to resist the direct benefits accruing from the hegemonic politics of recognition, being mindful of the consequences of such. This I see to be the lively everyday lived praxis of the 'development' dynamics of language teaching and education in the Asia Pacific. This is largely invisible behind the grand



narratives of neoliberal thinking, capitalisation, internationalisation, commodification and bureaucratisation of society, workplace and education. Hegemonic corporations, institutions, governments and global structures of knowledge and cultural production tend to promote 'standard' languages to the neglect of mother-tongue and indigenous languages, assisted by colonialist and new 'colonialists' dressed in the Emperor's new clothes, including nation-states, global corporations and discourses of 'empowerment', as highlighted in Hadley's paper.

In concluding, I think it is important to situate language teaching, linguistics and literature in frames of reference which are reflexive, critical, and transformative, those that enhance human dignity, social justice and equity, and those resistant to unconstrained technologisation, globalisation, and nation-state agendas of exclusion. Specifically, studies on the sociopolitical can help prevent symbolic violence to cultures and languages of communities and individuals. Awareness of the sociopolitical operating at the macro and the micro level of social and educational life can prevent the promotion of social and educational disadvantage, especially amongst individuals/communities who do not speak or do not wish to speak dominant language/s in particular contexts. Insights into the sociopolitical dimension of language and education can help us build communities which are inclusive and representative of diversity and difference.

On a different note, it is with pleasure that I announce the publication of the 2005 volume of 3L (Volume 10, 2005), a volume dedicated to language, education and society in the Asia Pacific. This will be a special commemorative publication on the occasion of the 35th Anniversary Celebrations of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

I would also like to invite contributions to the 2006 volume of 3L (Volume 11, 2006) in a special themed volume on language, literacy and society in the Asia Pacific, which I will be co-editing with a guest editor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Peter Kell from the University of Wollongong and the President of the Australian Vocational and Educational Association of Australia.

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