SHIFTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY IN MULTILINGUAL CONTEXTS: THE LEBANESE CASE

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Abstract – *This paper draws attention to the print environment in streets and shops in multilingual contexts. It applies a cultural framework to examine multilingual signs in Lebanon to show that they reflect a number of global and local changes in environmental literacy. It argues that these are important to educators because they are part of wider notions of literacy from which students may learn, even peripherally. The paper gives examples of slips and slides between Arabic, French and English to show that potentially environmental literacy can be a double-edged visible model of languages in relatively permanent public forms; it suggests the validity of multilingualism but presents erroneous or inappropriate examples to learners. However, teachers can encourage learners to observe such language processes in scripts and signs in the local street environment as part of raising critical language awareness.*

Introduction

$\mathcal{T}$ his paper draws on a series of studies in the Lebanon and elsewhere, which use visual ethnography (observation, photography, video recordings, and interviews) to see how literacy is used and learned in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Some of this work has argued that there are culturally specific approaches to literacy; for example, Chinese children seem to learn literacy in ways which are quite different from British children, partly because the Chinese script is so different and partly because Chinese teachers have quite different cultural assumptions about teaching and learning (Cortazzi, 1999; Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Jin and Cortazzi, 1998). This paper focuses on shop signs, shop fronts, notices, adverts and labels in Lebanon. These are in one sense all texts: semantic units appearing in real contexts which are written to be read, although they may not seem like pages or books. They are all examples of *environmental literacy*. This term is used here to draw attention to street signs and other printed messages which are a highly visible, relatively permanent part of the literacy environment which is publicly available. It can be assumed that many examples of environmental print, including those in two or more languages, are seen and read by large numbers of people even if some viewers are not fully conscious of the meanings. Since language learners, including children, live with environmental print around them it is entirely possible that they can acquire some

aspects of it as part of literacy learning, although this is by definition outside the classroom (Cronin, Farrell and Delaney, 1999). The examples which are part of the current visual ethnography were seen in multilingual contexts; some of the examples may be in a single language but most are bilingual or multilingual texts.

The paper argues that in recent years in many countries, including Lebanon, there has been a series of multilingual shifts in this kind of environmental literacy. These shifts may have consequences for public perceptions of the balance between languages, cultures and identities, for the teaching and learning of languages, and for learning and using literacy. There are therefore a number of educational implications for children and students. The paper suggests that environmental literacy—say through street signs and shop signs—is part of the cultural environment and an increasingly common informal context in which multilingualism and multiculturalism is encountered by learners of languages, among the public in general. In many cases, children's early encounters with other languages may be through such multilingual environmental print. Teachers may have a role in mediating environmental literacy so that learners can develop awareness of language and script diversity, of ethnic and other minorities and the source cultures relating to signs, and the role of English as a global language. Learners may be encouraged to develop curiosity and critical understanding of language in these multilingual contexts, and of the nature of multilingual public literacy. Lebanon is a clear case where this public literacy is often in two, and sometimes in three or more, languages, but in most Mediterranean countries the same phenomena are visible, and increasing, usually with a national language and English, but often in two local languages.

An example of what is involved stems from simply looking at restaurant signs and asking students to think about their local literacy environment in which these signs are commonplace. It is observable that in the Mediterranean and elsewhere the street signs which identify a restaurant or fast food outlet as a place to eat particular kinds of food are normally written in the national or regional language (i.e. in Greek in Greece, in Spanish or Catalan in Mallorca). However, such shop front signs may be transliterated from Greek or Arabic to a sign in Roman script so that tourists and other visitors (who may not be able to read the indigenous script) can identify the eating place. The names of restaurants may be translated, often into English, and this leads to a proliferation of multilingual signs. In the context of the increasing popularity of more international cuisines, there is a noticeable spread of 'national' restaurants outside their country of origin but this does not automatically multiply the languages or scripts used on the shop fronts. Thus French, Italian or Spanish restaurants in Lebanon may simply use signs in their respective languages without translation or transliteration into Arabic or English or another language. It is assumed that local people (nearly all using

Arabic as a first language) and visitors can read the sign in a non-Arabic script, and further, that they can identify the cuisine from the language of the name of the restaurant. This presumes some basic familiarity with other languages, but sometimes there are further details which label the food, and culture of origin (*French cuisine*; *ristorante Italiano*; *Spanish restaurant*). However, it is not obvious why *Spanish restaurant* in English might be used as a sign in Lebanon rather than *restaurante español*. Other complexities emerge when restaurants originating outside the Mediterranean are seen in this region. The popularity of Chinese, Indian, or Thai restaurants does not necessarily mean that non-European languages and non-Roman scripts will be used on shop fronts or in menus. While signs featuring Chinese written characters are nearly universal for Chinese restaurants and take-aways, alongside a sign in Arabic or English, it is extremely rare to find a sign in an Indian language or Thai for the latter eating places. As an exercise in raising awareness of language and social issues, it is interesting to ask students to think about possible reasons for these variations. This example will be followed up within the theoretical framework outlined below.

Literacies

Many researchers and educators now use the plural form, *literacies,* to signal that there are many kinds of texts which are read in different ways for different purposes. Different literacies may be associated with different domains of life, but each will be purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices (Barton *et al.*, 2000). The literacy taught in schools in most countries tends to concentrate on a very limited range of the whole spectrum of literacies actually used outside school. However, increasingly teachers are coming to realize that the literacy which students encounter in schools and colleges needs to be broadened to prepare the students for this wider range used in workplaces and in the public environment. For example, some teachers have focused primary and secondary students' attention on adverts as one way to develop more critical awareness of the role of the media in consumer societies as part of language or citizenship education. This article adopts this position: that educational literacy needs to take account of this wider range of literacies, including multilingual signs in the street environment, in order to raise learner's awareness of language and social issues, including awareness of their own and others' identities in multilingual contexts. This, in turn, will sharpen learners' perspectives on the more conventional literacy.

In recent years there has been a shift in the development of literacies with increasingly varied types, uses and complexities of using written words. Examples

of this are uses of electronic communication systems, the salience of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in texts, and increasing complexities and relationships between written and visual modes of meaning. Some scholars (The New London Group, 1996; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) have used the term *multiliteracies* to signal this multiplicity of communication channels and media. They draw attention to the need for changes in literacy pedagogies so that schools or universities should focus on broader modes of representation, promote wider social access to wider ranges of literacies, and become involved in more critical engagement with texts and discourses. Other researchers (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) have examined the areas in everyday life where reading and writing are of central importance and how literacy skills are learned. This is not always in schools since some literacy skills are learned informally and are integral to particular social relationships. These *vernacular literacies* include literacy for organizing life (using calendars, shopping lists), personal communication (writing letters, memos, cards), private leisure (reading magazines or newspapers), documenting life (using recipe books, calculating household finances), sense making (following instruction booklets or religious and devotional literature) and social participation in the local community (contributing to petitions or local newspapers). However, the kind of public literacy in multilingual contexts which is the present focus has rarely been discussed; when it has, the main point has been to show how English has an increasingly visible street profile in such apparently non-English contexts as streets in Italy (Ross, 1997) or Jordan (El-Yasin and Mahadin, 1996).

Culture and multilingual signs

The topic of literacies and shifts of literacies in multilingual contexts necessarily raises issues of culture since languages often represent particular cultures and since there may be culturally specific approaches to literacy. It is useful here to consider Duranti's (1997) outline of six theories of culture and to apply it to consider environmental literacies in Lebanon.

First, culture, as distinct from nature, is *learned and socially transmitted* through human actions, often through linguistic communication. Environmental literacy may be one mechanism for such transmission, for example the choice of language in multilingual contexts, and the choice of wording, in official signs or in street adverts, transmits social and cultural messages. Thus the frequency of bilingual or trilingual signs in Lebanon is a public symbol of *de facto* multilingualism, which in itself facilitates language learning by giving the constant opportunity in the written environment for comparison and translation.

There may be shifts across the languages which reflect or promote cultural shifts and there may be attempts to engineer such shifts, as when the highway authorities in Lebanon recently changed many English road signs to French (with French financial backing) alongside the Arabic signs.

Second, culture as *knowledge* means that shared patterns of thought, ways of understanding and of making inferences and predictions, are socially distributed throughout cultural groups, not necessarily equally. Understanding, inferring and predicting are, of course, important reading skills and these may be culturally distributed across different languages or literacies in different ways. Some cultural knowledge may be shared or spread via environmental literacies. A simple example is that through shop signs in Lebanon or elsewhere it is evident from horizontal signs that Arabic is written right to left and English or French is written left to right (to reverse either of these is nearly impossible, or a visual gimmick). Less obviously, it is visibly the case that in vertical signs, English and French can be written vertically either downwards with separated capital letters, or downwards with rotated words (with a 45 degree clockwise rotation) or upwards (with a 45 degree anti-clockwise rotation) and that this does not occur in Arabic signs. In multilingual signs using Arabic and English and French this dramatically affects the design potential for placing signs on shops and tall buildings, as any student could notice. In the very rare cases where Arabic is written vertically the letters are separated and, since this is rare in any other circumstances (except crosswords) this gives the sign an unusual and hard-to-read appearance. Arabic signs are almost never rotated, except occasionally in traditional, calligraphically decorated arches in mosques or rare commercial logos. Thus the semiotic distribution of design features in multilingual signs is to a large extent in complimentary distribution—what is frequently done with one script is not done with another. Sometimes this is culturally determined, e.g. e-mail, dot com, and world-wide web addresses must, at present, be given in 'English' (Roman script) even if the rest of the message is in Arabic; this is a public statement about access, or economic dominance, through one language and it is seen on shop fronts and advertising hoardings featuring website information. Occasionally one language in the print environment may rather artificially follow the natural trend of another in multilingual contexts. A trilingual sign for a Chinese restaurant in Beirut has its name written vertically in Chinese (this is the canonical direction for traditional signs in China); the translations in English and Arabic both follow this direction in parallel (not unnaturally for the first but highly unusually for the second). Further, the style of letter formation for the other two languages both imitates as far as possible the Chinese. Such a sign is a deeply iconic representation of multilingualism, but it reverses the more common trend for dominant languages to govern the visual space in the environment.

Third, culture as *communication* emphasizes that cultures are systems of signs or 'webs of significance' which must be communicated if the theory of the world of a particular cultural group is to be lived. Some of this sharing will be through environmental literacies; one example is the different kinds of scripts, signs, symbols and designs which are to be seen in the street outside places of worship in multicultural or multilingual societies. In Lebanon, signs in Armenian (generally alongside Arabic and often English or French also) do not only communicate the content meaning to those who read Armenian. The use of the visibly different Armenian script, with its characteristic non-Roman letters, also communicates important aspects of Armenian identity and culture to others who do not know that language but who can readily recognize the script. The fact that such signs are nearly always accompanied by other languages in Lebanon allows that non-Armenians (and not all those of Armenian family background) may not read the language. Importantly, these multilingual signs may also be taken to communicate that those who identify themselves as having Armenian identity also count themselves as Lebanese—the signs are almost never exclusively in Armenian script.

Fourth, culture as systems of *mediation* stresses how the material objects, belief systems, interpretations, and other aspects of culture, including language codes, are instruments through which members mediate their relationships with the world and with each other. Environmental literacy might be an important example of this mediation since it is so visible; it is difficult not to notice at least the fact of the existence of signs and shop fronts in various languages and arguably these may mediate relationships. The extreme frequency of shop signs in English or French, and often both, alongside the more frequent indigenous Arabic, can be said to mediate multilingualism in Lebanon. Thus signs commonly seen in English only (*computers, clothes, doctor, dentist*) or French only (*fleurs, boulangerie, fromagerie*) indicate a social assumption of widespread understanding. They also implicitly promote these words as target vocabulary even for those who may not count themselves as speakers of these languages, so that in monolingual English or French examples passers by inevitably associate the signs with the main items sold in the respective shops: flowers in the *florist*, bread in the *bakers*, and cheese in the *cheese store*. Since students in the Lebanese school system will learn French or English as a first foreign language (and vice-versa as a second foreign language) such frequently encountered examples will mediate the school learning of these languages. However, outside the cities and larger towns this multilingualism of signs is less frequent so such environmental literacy is less available.

Fifth, culture as systems of *practices* points out how many aspects of culture are routinized actions, recurrent and habitual systems of dispositions and expectations, including languages. For literacy studies, many scholars (Barton,

1994, Baynham, 1995, Street, 1995) now use the concepts of *literacy events*—occasions in which any piece of writing is integral to a particular social interaction and participants' interpretations of it—and *literacy practices*—the social and cultural conceptualizations which give meaning to the uses of reading and writing in literacy events. In these terms, environmental literacy events are social occasions when signs, labels and adverts, etc. have a role in social interaction and environmental literacy practices are cultural habits and expectations about such signs. Some such practices may imply different meanings or uses of symbolic power. An example in Lebanon is discussed later.

Sixth, culture as systems of *participation* emphasizes how people participate in interactions with social groups, sharing resources, beliefs, languages and other aspects of culture as members of a community of ideas and practices. Public literacies may help people to participate but some may actually exclude people, depending upon the language and cultural representation involved. Thus the assumption underlying the very frequent uses of French and English signs in Lebanon is that Lebanese society is multilingual and, as indicated above, this is reinforced by languages taught in the education system. However, many Lebanese families who fled the civil war (1975–1990) or who worked abroad for extended periods find that although their children identify themselves as Lebanese, their dominant language may not be Arabic (or French or English) since they may have grown up speaking Portuguese in Brazil or Spanish in Mexico, for example. Ironically, the multilingualism prevalent in street and shop signs may help them to learn to read the national language, Arabic, and thus to gain better access to Lebanese culture.

Diversification of languages and cultures

One reason why environmental literacies in multilingual contexts is important is because there is in many places a huge increase in the diversity of languages and cultures. One survey in London in 1986 found 161 languages being spoken in the schools, a survey a year later found 172 such languages, while another in 1999 found 275 (Baker and Eversley, 2000). This remarkable number can be attributed to population movements, of course, but also to the increasing recognition of language diversity, i.e. that children find that it is acceptable to admit that they speak languages other than English or that they come from multiple heritages. Similar surveys in New York and Melbourne in 1998 found 200 languages in each city. If each of these languages represents a culture (as seems generally likely although clearly not necessarily), this gives a picture of tremendous cultural diversity, although all these children will be learning English at school.

This diversity has some official recognition in Britain, and other European countries, which is seen in such examples of environmental literacy as 'welcome' signs or hospital notices and health information leaflets which may be available in many languages besides English. While such a range of diversity is less obvious in Lebanon, and there are no recent relevant census data, it is clear that Lebanon is more linguistically diverse than outsiders might think. Apart from the obvious widespread uses of English and French and the native Arabic, there is the Armenian community (about 5% of the population) and a huge range of languages known by Lebanese families who have lived in many countries for business purposes or to take refuge from the war but have now returned. Further, there are multilingual groups of itinerant workers who may have fairly long term residence in Lebanon, for example, the 'domestic helpers' from Southeast Asia. However, there is no guarantee that even language groups with substantial numbers will be represented in environmental literacy. The major languages of domestic helpers in Lebanon (Tagalog and other languages of the Phillipines or Tamil and Sinhala from Sri Lanka, for example) are not evident in street signs, though they may be spoken in the street.

Globalization of English and other languages

This diversity needs to be seen in the context of the global spread of English; those who live in Lebanon and other Mediterranean countries cannot fail to be aware of this. It is highly visible as environmental literacy, where English is used on shop fronts, in shop signs, clothing and food labels, menus, and in other public contexts. This globalization adds to, and is part of, the widespread perception of the prestige and status of English, although this accompanies—and has now probably overtaken—French in Lebanon. More selectively, Spanish and Italian, as Mediterranean languages, have an impact in cuisine, as seen in menus, restaurant signs and adverts. Turkish, on the other hand, despite (or perhaps because of) centuries of Ottoman influence in Lebanon, apparently has little or no representation in Lebanese environmental literacy today.

Localization

At the same time, besides English, many local languages might be used so that local groups can have access to public literacy in their own language. This may counter any feeling of linguistic pressure from English on other languages and give some feeling of 'voice' or representation to minority groups when members

see that their language and culture has a visible place on the streets, as may happen with Armenian signs. The specific placement of a language in the layout of a public sign may, however, be seen as inadequate representation, for example, if a particular language is always second, or last, or is given less space. In some countries there are rules or laws which specify some equality in linguistic representation (and size and placement in signs), sometimes so that a national language must come first. This is not the case in Lebanon.

Marketization

The diversification of languages and cultures and globalization (in the economic sense) has given rise to an interesting shift in environmental literacy which stands alongside the global uses of English for marketing. This shift is towards the use of multilingual packages, labels and adverts so that products are marketed in a surprisingly wide range of languages and scripts. For example, as many as 17 languages may be used on the packaging of baby nappies or children's toys, and 30 languages are written on the packets of free gifts given out to children in fast food chains, in Lebanon as elsewhere. Often, the information in these languages is visually framed in English in larger, more prominent print, presumably by multinational producers who know the global role of English in commerce and trade while they recognize the need to use many other languages for local purposes. These examples of environmental literacy may therefore be recurrent metaphors and visual reminders in shops and home of the political and economic role of English. These multilingual examples include not only the longstanding cases of having the instructions for electrical goods or cameras written in many languages but food packets and, as mentioned, children's toys. Babies and young children are therefore likely to be exposed to many languages and scripts long before they can actually read in any single language yet this exposure to environmental print has been shown to influence the acquisition of word reading (Cronin *et al.*, 1999) at least—but surely not only—in English.

Identification

The reasons for such multilingual packaging are partly associated with economies of scale in printing labels and distributing goods in many countries. People in different countries can read the labels in their own languages or different linguistic communities within any particular country can read an item in a language with which they can identify. But this marketization argument does not

tell the whole story since many packets identify the languages in question. Speakers of each language would not generally require their own language to be identified; they readily recognize it and simply read the part in that language. In fact, companies which produce such labels or packets often put flags or international identification abbreviations (such as are used on cars, e.g. *E* for Spain, *I* for Italy) beside each language. Sometimes such labels for the languages are the names, in English, for the language. Readers, participating in this literacy event with, say, a chocolate bar, read, open, and eat; they are systematically exposed to many languages and can therefore come to identify languages which they do not speak or read. At the same time, the producer is seen as a global player in the market; semiotically, such labels proclaim internationalism (or linguistic imperialism) and claim that the goods are sold in many countries and languages.

Representation

Such examples show how environmental literacy is used for multilingual marketing but languages can also be used to represent the national origin of a company or to represent cultures. Some adverts and signs in multilingual contexts have shifted to cultural uses of languages and scripts or they have explicitly drawn on some sense of multicultural consciousness to use another culture for branding in English. This is clear from the examples of the use of Japanese script to advertise in English, when few readers can actually read the Japanese, and of the use of Japanese proverbs to advertise Japanese food in English. This is part of a shift toward hybridity of languages and cultures in literacy contexts. However, such representation of slices of external cultures through signs in English and French in Lebanon can lead to slips in English and slides into Arabic, creating a new form of linguistic hybridity in environmental literacy, which is discussed below.

Participation, cultural contagion, and identity

This environmental use of many languages or cultures raises questions of participation: how can readers participate in a literacy practice when they do not know one—or any—of the languages involved? However, at one level simply to recognize that there are many languages is participation; to recognize (or on a label to be informed) what the languages are is a further level of participation; the existence of a translation for the reader who knows one of the languages is

clearly another level of participation (though this might focus attention away from other languages). Taking a theory of 'situated learning' (Lave, 1988; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Chaiklin and Lave, 1993) one could argue that there are relations between levels of participation, learning and identity such that any level of participation, however slight or informal, in an environmental literacy event is some level of learning on a continuum of novice to expert. In a multilingual or multicultural context such as Lebanon it can therefore be argued that the high visibility of these examples of multilingual texts in streets, shops or kitchen tables implies some degree of 'legitimate peripheral participation' in a situated literacy practice. It seems then that environmental texts which are multilingual may lead to shifts in public perceptions of multilingualism and multiculturalism in the direction of awareness of languages and scripts and of the existence of the cultural communities they represent. In many cases these will admittedly be small shifts but the accumulation of such cases must make a difference.

This argument can be reinforced by reference to Sperber's (1996) explanation of culture through the 'epidemiology of representations'. He argues that ideas are spread through cultural contagion, that such aspects of culture as concepts, memories, or beliefs are *cognitive representations* in the mind which are transmitted (and in fact generally transformed) through communication. Communication in any literacy event is therefore only in more or less faithful versions. Some mental representations, as say through environmental literacy, may be taken up by other people and become relatively stable within a group as *public representations*. If these are widely and durably distributed within a social group they may become *cultural representations*. Individual participation in environmental literacy events and practices may thus be part of cultural practices and representations but they can also contribute to changing cultural practices.

Shifts in environmental literacy practices, such as those exemplified later, may therefore be part of and actively assist more general linguistic and socio-cultural change. Some of this participation will involve identity, as members of a linguistic or cultural group identify with their language or culture as it is represented in the printed environment. This is likely to be problematic in many cases when linguistic and cultural identity are primary identities but environmental literacy contexts often involve fleeting participation and situational identities (Ting-Toomey, 1999). However, in at least some cases, environmental literacy in multilingual contexts might justifiably be regarded as 'mediated discourse' (Scollon, 1998). This may help to construct part of a sense of person and identity not only of the self of an individual participant but of others whose language is represented in a text.

Erosion of standards through slips

A problematic aspect of environmental literacy is that some signs and labels, say in English, which are written in multilingual contexts, contain slips and errors, as judged by the linguistic descriptions in standard grammar texts. These may be seen as a lack of literacy in English. They may challenge the sense of authenticity of the use of English in the locality or may be seen as steps in the erosion of standards, especially because they are public, visible, and perhaps relatively permanent. They might also be seen as signs of an actual or emergent local variety of English, although many teachers would not be happy to see this variety prominent in print in the street. Such deviant forms and uses may include: errors in word division *(NEWZEALAND SHEEP SKINRUGS)*, unusual abbreviations *(GEN. MAINT. & CLEANING EST.* on a shop offering household repairs), mistakes in spelling and punctuation *(REALSTATE OFFICE; PLUMING AND BUILDING MATERS; LOWEST PRINCOS IN TOWN* for bargain prices), shifts between categories of mass and count nouns *(SHOES WEARS EQUIPMENTS; ALL KIND BUILDING MATERIALS)*, use of verb tenses *(WE SERVED WESTERN FOOD)*, translation into English *(FARHAD'S MASSACRE* on a butcher's shop), and anomalous semantic categories in English transferred from Arabic *(SOFT COFFEE, ROUGH COFFEE)*. Some will affect intelligibility, others will threaten acceptability *(NO OVERTAKING ABSOLUTELY; DRIVING WITH CARE IS SAFETY OR IT IS A REGRET)*. Often such signs show combinations of such features *(SAND WITCHES, FRESH JUICES AND HUMBERGERS;* or *TEL SYSTEM, TEL REPAIR, FAX SMILE* on an electrical store). Some may be reasonable variation but only if the local culture and usage is understood *(CLEANSING AND SLAUGHTERING HALLAL BUTCHERY,* for meat from animals killed according to Islamic ritual). Others will perhaps evoke unanticipated reactions of humour, the mocking or deprecation of local users of English, or simply quite different pragmatic take ups *(DANGER, SLOW MEN AT WORK)*. When such errors are commonplace, as happens in some Middle Eastern localities (in fact, much less in Lebanon than in some nearby countries), there may be a shift in public perceptions of English either towards acceptability (because there is a build up of apparently legitimate public uses) or towards the need for correction and higher standards, with perhaps some blame unjustifiably attached to English teachers.

Creativity and decorative English

Some apparent errors may not in fact be errors but simply the use of local names or words transliterated into English. Others may be creative efforts towards

new expression in English. Yet others may be more decorative or ornamental than meaningful (Doughill, 1987; Brock, 1991), since they are talismans of modernity and prestige (i.e. they use the status of usage of English or something that looks like English) although linguistically they may be incorrect or even meaningless to those who understand English. Such creative examples can be found on tee-shirts, jackets, sports bags, children's clothes and toys, sweets and chocolate bars, or even on scooters (*TO FEEL EXUBERAN TRY HAPPY*; *JOY IS FASCINATE TO YOU*; *ECOLOGY NEW STAND AND NEW LIFE FOR GREEN*).

Lebanon: slides across languages

As a multilingual and multicultural country with longstanding linguistic traditions in education and commerce, Lebanon has many visible examples of shifts in environmental literacy across Arabic, English and French, and perhaps across other languages such as Armenian too. An interesting aspect is what might be called *slides,* where one language apparently briefly slides into another in writing on a shop front or shop sign. An example is the shop in the Hamra area of Beirut called *Gentlemen's Corner* which is transliterated into Arabic script; without local knowledge or knowledge of the English the Arabic seems to have many possible variant readings, particularly since short vowels are not normally written in Arabic. This does not seem to be quite code switching or code mixing, since in some cases a reader or participant needs to know two languages to make sense of one of them: without a knowledge of English, a reading of the Arabic may be difficult or impossible. As the two languages generally accompany each other a reader has recourse to one language to understand the other, but sometimes the Arabic transliteration stands alone; one language has in effect slid into another to create hybrid forms. These may be a result of (mis)transliteration and they may lead to, or consolidate, variant pronunciation, but they may equally promote an interesting functional multilingualism in public literacy contexts.

Many slides seem to be from English into Arabic, but some are from French into Arabic. A common French example is phonetically 'ba:ti:seri:' for *patisserie.* Some may be effectively loanwords used in signs instead of orally, but many Beirut shop names are whole phrases in English which are slid into Arabic. *Four Steps Down*, *Way In*, *Show Me*, *Motor Trade*, *Art Personnel*, *Big Boys*, *Coffee Bean*, *Family Stores* and even *Bloody Mary* all find their way into Arabic environmental literacy. It is difficult to see how these would be understood in Arabic script without a knowledge of English. Plainly, the Arabic uses English and thereby implicitly claims status, modernity, westernization, globality or youth culture in a multilingual context. In one way, such signs are designed to be read

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rather than said, but perhaps predictably, some transliterations from English take on Arabic characteristics, so that 'p' becomes phonetically 'b', 'v' becomes 'f', 'g' becomes the fricative ' ʁ ', vowels and diphthongs take Arabic values, and consonant clusters are simplified. Thus 'puncture' becomes in Arabic transliteration 'bansher', *Teddy Land* is rendered 'Tidi Land', *Wonder Zoo* is somewhat like 'Wandar Zouou', *Top Snob* becomes 'Toop Sonoob', *Target Travel* is 'Targat Terafel', *Novelty* becomes 'Noofootee', *Next* might be rendered 'Naksat', and the shop called—and selling—*Mixed Nuts* becomes (in Arabic) 'Mick's Nut', 'Mix Nut' (phonetically 'miːks nʌt'), while *Belle Mariee* from a French-named store selling wedding clothes becomes 'Bill Maryee' ('biːl maːriː iːyɛː'). Inevitably, then, such slides from English into Arabic involve not only Anglicization but also some Arabization. Perhaps there is some feeling for localization while representing hybrids. In one example, this sliding has included French (or European) punctuation which does not exist in Arabic, suggesting a Gallicization in print in the street environment: the French *l'auto* (car) has been transliterated with an apostrophe after the letter 'lam' (or 'l') in the Arabic 'loutou', perhaps to distinguish it visually from another slide, 'loutou' in Arabic or *lottery/lotterie*. There is scope for confusion in this proliferation of creative sliding into Arabic.

A literacy event comparison

At the risk of taking literacy events out of context, since one literacy event is often chained to others at least in education, one might briefly compare cultural practices adopted by students in reading and using texts outdoors in public on the university campus (i.e. not in the classroom, library or at home). In China, it is commonplace for students to go out in front of classroom buildings or in green areas or near flowerbeds, trees and hedges to engage in *'self study time'*, as they call it. This means finding a space about one metre apart from any others who may be nearby and taking a disciplined stance to stand very straight or sit very upright and read aloud a textbook or other public text. This may be in English or Chinese or a mixture of both. Chinese students engaging in this public literacy practice read, repeat, recite, reiterate translations or explanations in the book, reflect, memorize the words and content and come to understand it. In this way they prepare for class and practice, perhaps for ten to thirty minutes each day. In Lebanon, it is commonplace, at least on some campuses, for students to go out in front of classroom buildings or stand and sit in groups in open areas. This may be termed *'revision time'* by students. It means finding a partner or a group to collaboratively read, write, ask questions and generally prepare for a test, but

simultaneously or intermittently to chat, drink, smoke, use mobile phones and engage in other social activities. This may be in English, French or Arabic or another language; reading and writing may be in English while talk may be in Arabic or several languages may be mixed. Groups are quite flexible, transient or shifting in their participation as some students join or leave or, rarely, read alone. If they are alone they read or write silently.

Both of these situations involve public texts, two or more languages and study or preparation for a classroom activity but clearly, and visibly, they are differently aligned in social and cultural ways. It is highly likely, of course, that Chinese students will also be social, collaborative and highly interactive in some of their study activities elsewhere and at other times and it is equally likely that Lebanese students will engage singly and in a disciplined manner in some form of self study but these are probably situationally bound practices which apply to other contexts. In fact, when I showed photos of Chinese students engaged in their self study to one class of Lebanese students some commented, 'We could never do that here, it's impossible for us.' I take this comment to mean not that they cannot study (since it is clear that they can do so very successfully) but that certain forms of multilingual study practices and uses of public texts are culture or context specific and that the Lebanese students feel that socially or culturally they could not stand, sit, and recite in the Chinese way. And yet when so many aspects of environmental literacy practices are visibly and publicly shifting perhaps either Chinese or Lebanese students could change their literacy practices, if this were thought to be desirable.

Educational implications

Some educational implications are that the aspects of change to which this article has drawn attention are necessarily part of the literacy environment. Teachers may find it useful to reflect on the possible impact of environmental literacy on learning and using literacy in more formal educational situations. It may be helpful for teachers to get students to notice the key features of the local print environment in streets and shops and observe any multilingual and multicultural aspects. Teachers might further see themselves as mediators between informal and formal contexts of literacy practices so that they help students to raise their awareness of these out-of-class literacies. This could then assist learners to develop critical responses to multilingual and multicultural communication contexts, to be more aware of and perhaps sensitive to ethnic minorities and other users of public literacies, and to critically engage with learning and using English (or French and other languages) as a global language

in the wider socio-cultural ecology of languages. We may need in one way or another all the linguistic and cultural resources and features of this ecology as much as English.

A teacher in Lebanon writing about language and culture in her country recently drew attention to the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, who in 'The Labyrinth of Solitude' says, *'Life is plurality, death is uniformity. Every view that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes the possibility of life.'* If this seems true, or even partly true, then Lebanon seems to have plenty of linguistic and cultural life; if it does not seem true, or even partly untrue, then that disagreement is a view, according to Paz, which we might need for the possibility of life. If that seems like a contradiction, well, perhaps multilingual and multicultural situations are inherently situations in tension and that, too, is part of their life.

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