

## **New Approaches to Language, Identity and Culture: A More Inclusive Conversation**

Llamas, Carmen and Dominic Watt, eds. 2009. *Language and Identities*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Nakamura, Lisa, Peter Chow-White, and Alondra Nelson, eds. 2011. *Race After the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Nunan, David, and Julie Choi, eds. 2010. *Language and Culture: Reflective Narratives and the Emergence of Identity* (ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series). New York: Routledge.

Pennycook, Alastair. 2010. *Language as a Local Practice*. New York: Routledge.

Rivers, Damian, J. and Stephanie Ann Houghton, eds. 2013. *Social Identities and Multiple Selves in Foreign Language Education*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Watzke, John L., Paul Chamness Miller, and Miguel Mantero, eds. 2010. *Readings in Language Studies, Volume II: Language and Power*. Lakewood Ranch, FL: International Society for Language Studies.

### **Reviewed by Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar, Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar**

At a recent international Liberal Arts and Sciences conference in Qatar, organized by the branch campus of Texas A&M University, I presented on a panel about students, faculty and home culture. As panelists, we offered multiple perspectives on teaching an increasingly diverse student body the craft of writing. There was much debate about how global English impacts writing instruction. Given that there is no Standard American or European English, the same questions and answers are likely being replicated in English conferences and department meetings around the world. Language is intricately tied to identity and culture; the words we use are perhaps the most intangible expression of our position and orientation to the world, paradoxically defining our experiences, despite not being solid objects. As educators, we can no longer ignore that creating global citizens means we must engage with students' identity, languages, and culture, as well as acknowledging our own. Current research trends in applied linguistics mirror this shift from Anglo-speaking educators serving as authorizers of singular purposes for English language toward a broader understanding of the function of language within specific contexts. The shift in authority and emphasis from grammar or mechanics to meaning and message empowers students' diversity of experience and backgrounds. The notion of Global English(es) allows for a more complex understanding of students as learners and creators of language as well as the purpose, practice, and setting of academic training.

Academic scholarship is beginning to take notice of the need to examine how language, identity, and culture can inform and affect the way we understand others and ourselves as scholars. Recent publications are taking more interest in a decentering approach to the use of language, focusing on the usage of language in a variety of local settings instead of on standards based on grammatical rules. No longer the purview of specialist departments, such as ESL or EFL, inclusivity has been mainstreamed, and encouraged across the curriculum.

In *Language as a Local Practice*, Alistair Pennycook explores language as a dynamic activity, rather than as a structure, governed by rules and authorities. In Pennycook's research, language, space, and place are connected as ways to understand human behaviors in specific locations and at certain times. This emphasis on the local demonstrates the twentieth-century shift in social science research toward more empirical research and the need for purposeful studies, and away from broad, overarching principles applied homogeneously to heterogeneous populations (Pennycook 2010, 1). He defines the local as being specific, resisting what is seen as the homogenization of culture through globalization. In calling for research that examines the particular, he is updating the applied linguistic trend where the practice of language is of central interest. Pennycook sees the need for real-world applications in research. He argues convincingly that language is a repeated social activity, which needs more understanding rather than "trying to fit the languages of the world into the European Average" (10). Echoing this trend to move away from a central authority of how English should be used, is the research studying how language is being used by specific communities. Bilingualism, context, and use of English by speakers around the world is a movement away from classifying everyone as English-as-Second-Language (ESL) speakers who may not be getting the conventions of English "right." Rather, the focus is examining use of English on a speaker's own terms. This is true for instructors in many of the American university branch campuses abroad. In the Education City project, for example, of six American universities offering their main campus degrees in Qatar, the writing center staff and faculty meet frequently to discuss ways of engaging and strengthening student work. While the students are fluent speakers of English, their knowledge of the academic conventions of writing are in need of support.

*Language and Identities* is a strong collection of essays with a wide-ranging focus on theory, practice, and regions around the world. Llamas and Watt (2009) have compiled perspectives on the centrality of language to understanding individual and group identity; the essays demonstrate that sociolinguistics is a field with endless research potential in an area of globalization where individuals are negotiating their loyalties and participation in more than one community. One of the essays, "Gendered Identities in the Professional Workplace: Negotiating the Glass Ceiling," (Mullany, in Llamas and Watt 2009, 179-190) is a fascinating example of the socio-linguistic evidence of gender and language practice. Mullany explores how women's advancement in the workplace is helped or hindered by the material expressions, or phrases, used by men and women in professional settings. This type of examination demystifies commonly accepted notions and suggests ways of overcoming inequalities furthered by particular language usage.

Related to these themes is the role in which identity is portrayed on the Internet. The myth that technology has erased our identity markers of race, class, or gender is dispelled in *Race After the Internet* (Nakamura, Chow-White, and Nelson, 2011). The editors have curated a compelling conversation about how race, social class, and identity often reflect the socio-economic markers of identity exhibited in physical places. Rather than erasing categories, technology and access to digital spaces often reinforce many of the existing social codes. A compelling example is "White Flight in Networked Publics?: How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with My Space and Facebook" (Boyd, in Nakamura et al. 2011, 203). Boyd takes the reader through a fascinating account of white students who transition away from MySpace because users exhibit "ghetto" culture. The research takes an ethnographic turn as interviewees disavow racist tendencies but refer to social culture—musical preferences and speech—as the cause for differentiation between themselves as others (Ibid.). She explains this discomfort with acknowledging difference as an inability to discuss race without fear of offending. Engaging in conversations about race and difference, how language and power work to inform our everyday experiences, however unaccustomed

or uncomfortable, is essential. This is why collections of conference proceedings such as *Readings in Language Studies, Volume II: Language and Power* (Watzke, Miller, and Mantero, 2010) are an important demonstration of valuable overviews of the trends, themes, and discussion in these areas.

On balance, these texts demonstrate an increased sensitivity and awareness of the global dynamic of linguistic practice. As someone who has a background in postcolonial studies, I find this shift heartening because this growing body of research across the humanities demonstrates an acute awareness that the West is not the sole owner of English or a dominant global identity. Through specific, local interventions, focused on the context and use of language, we will continue to explore the ways in which race, social class, and gender inform our shifting selves. This is a positive trend that will surely create new avenues of exploration. One such example is the expansion of academic or research writing to include the first person point of view, personal anecdotes, and storytelling as means of scholarly interpretation, as found in *Language and Culture: Reflective Narratives and the Emergence of Identity* (Nunan and Choi, 2010). These are academics who study themselves, revealing insights in their own experiences of language learning in the creation of a new kind of scholarly narrative, one that I hope is taken up by many others.

These themes are explored by researchers in Rivers and Houghton's collections of essays, *Social Identities and Multiple Selves in Foreign Language Education* (2013). The volume expands the conversation around foreign language beyond issues of grammar and syntax to include notions of identity incurred by labeling. The authors explore how "otherness" is a direct consequence of being labeled foreign, which challenges the notion of a "center" by focusing on populations normally thought of as at the margins of the "first" world. The lived experience of readers and speakers and their interactions with English text and language, as highlighted in these research studies, demonstrates that there is no static sense of identity; we shift, modify, and negotiate our identities according to context.

As student learners grow in their abilities, they will also increase their exposure to the tools of practice, including the conventions of academic writing as a genre, the peculiarities of grammar, and the features of sound mechanics. Acknowledging these skills as the means to participate in a particular conversation with a defined audience also allows for more robust understanding of learners and teachers as people with plural identities; we can communicate in academia but also remain relevant to our various communities.