Crossing Deep Divides: Exploring the Dynamics of Multilingual College Students' Language and Literacy Experiences

Rachel Kook, Emily Tummons, Kwangok Song, Sarah AlRasheed, Liyan Yang
University of Kansas

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Background

- This study examines the relationality of social and material "forces of encounter," or affects, in multilingual college students' becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)
- It emphasizes the fluid nature of multilingual identities and how literacy practices foster resilience and agency.
- **Context:** Transnationalism contributes to bi/multilingualism and literacy in multiple languages. English is urged as a global lingua franca, while heritage language maintenance is also valued.
- **Research Gap:** U.S. research often centers Latino/a students; diverse multilingual college experiences remain underexplored.
- **Purpose:** To examine how social, cultural, and material aspects shape students' language and literacy practices across contexts and lives.

Theoretical Framework

New Literacy Studies

- Literacy as a social practice is situated in institutional domains (Street, 1984).
- Literacy practices are in multiple forms depending on sociocultural contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2012).
- Multilingual literacy practices are hybridized as multilingual individuals interweave linguistic and cultural resources (Duranti & Ochs, 1996; Gregory, 2004; Gutierrez et al.,1999).

Affect Theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)

- Affects have "ability to affect and be affected," not just emotions or internal state in a psychological sense (Masumi, 1987, n.p.).
- Affects are "the ability to affect and be affected," arising from bodies' encounter, where "body" includes material objects, space, ideas, histories, and culture (Boldt & Leander, 2020, p.516).

Should you have any questions, please contact
Rachel Kook at kookrh@ku.edu or
Kwangok Song at ksong@ku.edu

Research Questions

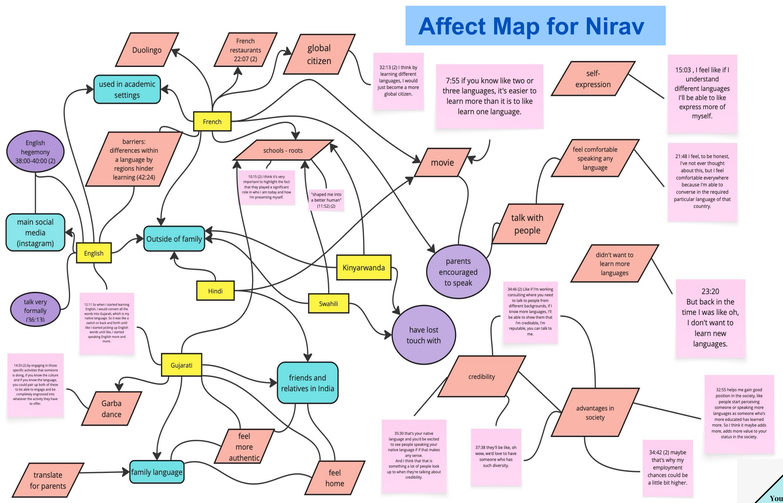
1. How are affects assembled in multilingual students' narratives about their languages and literacy activities?
2. What relational patterns of affects emerge?
3. How do these patterns depict tensions across their language practices and social expectations?

Participants & Contexts

- 20 multilingual undergraduates at a Midwestern university
- 7 international; 13 students from immigrant families
- Varied language backgrounds
- **Focal Participants**
  - **Nirav(20, M):** International student; Gujarati as his heritage language, learned French and English in East Africa; Math and applied computing major
  - **Mitu (21, F):** Immigrant; Amharic as her heritage language with Ethiopian background; Biochemistry major

Findings

Affect Map for Nirav



Second Entry Point: Reterritorialization

- Reclaimed their connection to the heritage language as young adults through interactions with family, friends, and relatives in their heritage language(s). → Created a nurturing environment for native/heritage languages.
- Cultural literacy (e.g., news articles, movies), literacy activities in religious practices, cultural traditions, and Internet literacy resources supported reterritorialization.
- **Mitu:** Reestablished her connection to her heritage language, preserves Amharic through religious literacy and *tikila* (Romanized Amharic) in online literacy activities.

Methods

Data Collection:

- Background survey: Language history and self-rated proficiency
- 2–3 semi-structured interviews with each participant (120–180 mins total)
- Participant shared images, photos, cultural artifacts, and online activities on Zoom.

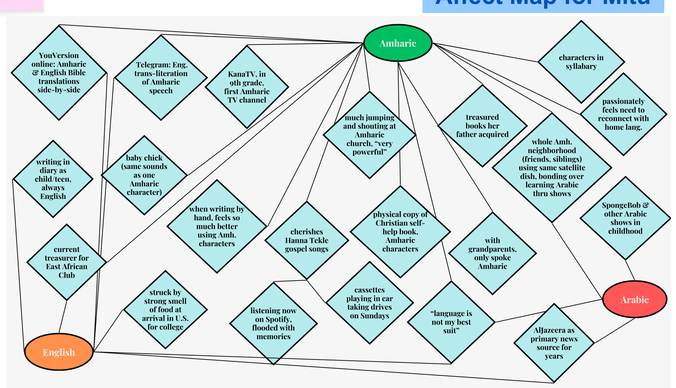
Data Analysis

- Team discussed salient features from the Interviews and compared participants' experiences with literacy practices in their two languages.
- Rhizomatic analysis was used to explore the dynamic, interconnected, and mutually influencing nature of affects (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Masny & Cole 2014)
- We created maps to demonstrate interconnections to reveal patterns in multilingual experiences.
- We developed themes by considering the features identified in mapping.

First Entry Point: English Acquisition as Deterritorialization

- English as a lingua franca in international and U.S. contexts
- Symbolic and physical border-crossing accelerated deterritorialization as participants spent more time with English.
- Nirav: Relocation to the U.S. → Immersed in an English-dominant environment → English as the primary language in social and academic life (digital literacy in social media)'
- Mitu: Embraced the integration of English in Ethiopia, her pursuit of English literacy aligned with its role as a lingua franca

Affect Map for Mitu



Conclusion

- The domination of English disrupted multilinguals' relationships with their first/heritage language in various ways.
- Multilingual young adults exercised their agency in reestablishing their relationships with their heritage language and culture.
- The nature of multilingual identities is fluid and dynamic, not static.
- Embodied experiences through religion, music, family traditions shape multilingual becoming.
- Varied literacy practices foster resilience and agency in multilinguals.

Implications

- Educators should promote practices that empower multilingual students to regain and utilize their linguistic and cultural agency.
  - Interactions between multilingual young adults and K-12 students may create additional opportunities.
  - ESL educators in the U.S. should engage with the complex and ongoing experiences of multilingual learners beyond surface-level backgrounds.
- More studies on multilingual young adults' literacy practices are encouraged to understand dynamic and fluid nature of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in their language and literacy practices.
  - More attention could be paid to experiences of young adults from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

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