

Book Review

The semiotics of new spaces: Languaging and literacy practices in one South African Township – Charlyn Dyers

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Charlyn Dyers's, *The semiotics of new spaces: Languaging and literacy practices in one South African township* (2018) provides a rich description and analysis of the language and literacy practices in a township called Wesbank – situated on the socio-economically peripheral margins of the city of Cape Town. The volume offers insight into the various types of multilingualism(s) that emerge from a township that was established in post-apartheid South Africa. Dyers points out that South African townships have become 'significant' sites for sociolinguistic research. However, she singles out Wesbank as a 'hybrid community' (pg.11) as it differs considerably from other townships in terms of its ethnolinguistic diversity. Wesbank is described as 'one of the first multiracial townships' (pg.10) in South Africa, as the township was established in 1999 after the period of enforced racial that created segregated neighbourhoods. The townships's ethnolinguistic demographics are a result of the broader 'massive migration' patterns from rural to urban epicentres in South Africa (pg.9). The migration to Wesbank is complex

in spectrum: people classified under the apartheid regime as Coloured (mostly Afrikaans-speaking) have moved there translocally – mostly from rural towns in the Western and Northern Cape areas; and Black isiXhosa-speaking residents have migrated from the Eastern Cape. Furthermore, transnational migrants have arrived from other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Somalia and Nigeria. The residents are, however, multilingual and have brought with them multiple and diverse linguistic repertoires. Dyers investigates how participants in several research projects draw on semiotic resources in their language and literacy practices. In particular, the use and roles of Afrikaans, isiXhosa, and the urban mixed varieties such as Kaaps and mixed isiXhosa-based varieties, are explored – combined with the role of English as a 'powerful language of wider communication' in Wesbank (pg.37).

Dyers states her interest as a sociolinguist in the 'linked aspects of culture, language and identity' in a space of a 'confluence of ethnicities who had to find pathways towards peaceful co-existence and communication across

ethnolinguistic and cultural barriers' (pg.11). She poses two central questions: firstly, 'What do people from diverse backgrounds do with their existing linguistic resources when moving to challenging new urban settings where they have to learn to co-exist with people from very different backgrounds?', and 'What are the implications of such practices for community building, educational institutions and state language policies?' (pg.3). The questions are not primarily answered through the lens of everyday linguistic and literacy practices, as the residents' overt discourses that were elicited through interviews and writing tasks are central to the discussions. In these discussions Dyers addresses the complexity of race 'as a feature of our investigation' (pg.16), and refreshingly includes individuals' attitudes toward other ethnolinguistic or cultural groups' communicative practices.

The volume encapsulates Dyers' and post-graduate students' findings from the Universities of the Western Cape, Ghent and Antwerp, forming part of a larger international research partnership called 'The dynamics of building a better society'. Spanning a decade (between 2004 and 2014), the findings benefit from a longitudinal perspective during a time of particularly dynamic and rapid social change in post-apartheid South Africa. For example, the longitudinal research affords the researchers to observe the changing role languages in the linguistic landscape (pg.84).

Chapter 1 discusses the socio-economic profile of Wesbank and introduces the groups of participants within the context of the continuous detrimental impact of colonialism and apartheid on people living in marginalised communities. Similar to

other townships in South Africa, Wesbank is broadly considered as a community with low levels of education and income, and high levels of unemployment, skills deficiency and 'social ills' such as crime and alcoholism (pg.12, 15). However, in a section called 'Initial lessons learned while doing research in Wesbank' (pgs.14-17) Dyers importantly cautions against stigmatized views and negative common assumptions researchers may have regarding such issues, as well as race relations and residents' aspirations and future prospects in townships. During the on-going fieldwork the researchers learned that the 'reality is far more complex', for example, that the participants aspired to improve their circumstances and that there is great variation between ethnolinguistic groups' and individuals' educational levels (pg.15). Consequently, Dyers argues that one should not overlook the social stratification (that may coincide with racial stratification) within township areas. Interestingly, in a later discussion of literacy education, Dyers argues that different levels of education may be manifested in the spatial stratification of Wesbank, i.e. the best educated residents live closest to amenities such as transport links.

Data was collected from two projects: firstly, women who participated in community-based projects aimed at skills training and development, for example, domestic work, arts and crafts and adult literacy classes as well as a prayer group. Secondly, extensive school-based research projects involved male and female students and their teachers from the local dual medium (Afrikaans-English) high school. An ethno-methodological approach afforded researchers to interact with residents in various contexts. The diverse data collection methods (and their

purposes), including in-depth interviews, questionnaires, literacy surveys, focus groups, life history interviews and various writing assignments are set out in useful tables (pgs.19 and 21). Furthermore, the use of several research assistants with various linguistic backgrounds enabled participants to be interviewed in language varieties they felt most comfortable in.

In light of the widely debated language shift towards English in some South African speech communities, Dyers explores the contributing factors of language *maintenance* of Afrikaans and isiXhosa by teenagers in Chapter 3. Although English serves as a '*lingua franca*' in some contexts (pg. 19), and is the preferred language of instruction at school level, interviews revealed that young people 'identify strongly with their home languages, especially when it enhances their personal and group identities or is a symbol of their ethnolinguistic distinctiveness' (pg.37). For example, Dyers argues that speakers of Afrikaans and varieties such as Kaaps, may have a 'powerful sentimental attachment to the language as a signifier of individual and group identity' (pg. 37). Moreover, young Xhosa participants do not necessarily shift away from isiXhosa per se but rather diverge from the 'deep rural' (pg.37) varieties – and communicate in a mixed urban vernacular with their peers (as illustrated in the example on page 33). Throughout the volume, Dyers highlights such use of 'bits of language', and 'translanguaging' and 'code-switching' practices, without labouring to distinguish old and new terms of multilingualism. In a context where people have migrated from elsewhere to live either permanently or temporarily, and where young migrants are forming new social networks, 'making friends across ethnolinguistic

barriers' (pg. 49), and 'translanguaging practices' are 'a fun thing to do' (pg. 48), Dyers fittingly steers clear of defining multilingual practices and frequently refers to such practices as the 'blending', or the 'mixing and blending' of languages.

In Chapter 3, Dyers presents the concept of *portable multiliteracies* to discuss 'how ordinary women with incomplete or no formal education negotiate different forms of literacy in an urban environment [...] to truly become active, participatory citizens in the New South Africa?' (pg. 51). The concept approaches literacy as multimodal and 'multiple' resources, as it considers text-based, oral and visual communicative practices 'that vary and are contested according to time and space' (pg.53). Furthermore, literacies are 'portable' or 'mobile' in the sense that they are resources that 'people have acquired either formally or informally, and which they *bring with them* as they migrate to new spaces' (pg.52 my emphasis.) With unequal access to education, the women have mostly acquired literacies that are only 'directly relevant to their needs' (pg.61). Dyers points out that portable literacies 'work best when shared' (pg.56) as the participants depend and draw on each other's literacy resources to participate in, or complete tasks. Chapter 5 continues the focus on adult women's literacies: here Dyers effectively employs Appraisal Analysis (Martin & Rose 2007) to explore the 'attitudinal positionings' (pg.67) in journals written by women in a training workshop. The analysis reveals not only the positive value of the journal writing exercise but also discloses 'evidence of strong agency and voice' as well as 'depression and a sense of being overwhelmed'.

Chapter 6, 'A messy linguistic market' centres on practices in commercial spaces

in Wesbank. A multimodal analysis of the linguistic landscape (henceforth LL), as well as verbal communication between business owners, vendors, employees, customers and security guards, addresses the central question: i.e. how people from very different cultural and linguistic backgrounds 'learn to co-exists'. Taking into account 'overlaid traces of racism and xenophobia' (pg. 81), Dyers argues that people 'have learned to communicate with somewhat *cautious conviviality* across the linguistic and cultural barriers' (pg.96). For example, Coloured traders make use of '*faux isiXhosa*' by attaching an isiXhosa prefix to English words (pg. 82). The analysis of the LL includes the role of 'foreign nationals' from other African countries. Dyers concludes that the role of Afrikaans has diminished and that businesses advertise mostly in English. However, the 'underlying multilingualism and multiliteracies of the population' (pg. 84) is evident in the 'emblematic' use of Afrikaans and isiXhosa in the LL.

In Chapter 7 Dyers revisits and critically assesses the effectiveness of Blommaert et al.'s (2005) concept of *truncated multilingualism* in studying language vitality Wesbank. In particular, she considers how it can help 'to reflect how communities with distinctive ethnolinguistic characteristics, who had formerly been kept apart by the *apartheid* regime, are now forced by their new environment to communicate with one another' (pg.105). Most interestingly, Dyers uses the concept to untangle how the socio-cultural identities of teenagers growing up in 'cross-linguistic, cross-cultural households' in Wesbank are formed (pg.98). The effects of the apartheid regime's segregation laws on the most intimate life aspects have resulted in multiracial families continuing to be a minority in South

Africa. Making use of case studies, Dyers considers how teenagers draw on their linguistic repertoires and how this impact on language vitality in various contexts. As the analysis turns to the multilingual language and literacy practices in the language classroom at the local high school (Chapter 8), another concept that emerged from the Blommaert et al (2005) study, namely, *peripheral normativity*, is examined. In the socio-economically marginalised context of the Wesbank school, the concept refers to 'restricted literacy repertoires' of students as well as their teachers. What the Chapter highlights is the arbitrariness of what are considered 'standard' forms of language that are taught and used in schools. Furthermore, considering the participants' use of informal language varieties (for example, Kaaps and other hybrid forms of language) rather than standard forms in their everyday lives, Dyers strongly advocates for language policies that accept the 'actual language repertoires of pupils to the classroom' (pg.118).

Throughout her book, Dyers points out the positive outcomes the research had on the participants. However, in the *Conclusion* Chapter, 'Becoming a change for voices from the periphery: The role of the socially responsible sociolinguist', Dyers takes an honest look at the research process and reflects on the social accountability of sociolinguistic research in vulnerable communities. She suggests that the participants' attempts to reach out to the researchers during the data collection process were 'either ignored or uncovered too late' (pg.124). Dyers provides practical suggestions regarding how situations could have handled in a more responsible manner. She strongly suggests that sociolinguist should draw on their resources to assist participants in their plight. Moreover, interdisciplinary

research teams could be more effective to assist communities as well yield richer results.

In the *Introduction*, Dyers indicates that the intended readership of the book includes sociolinguistic students as well as 'anyone interested in the linguistic realities of peripheral urban communities in post-*apartheid* South Africa' (pg.2). The writing style is certainly accessible and the sub-questions in each section could be a useful to those researching a wide range of themes within multilingualism. The complexity of the research themes

in the context of Wesbank are frequently touched upon, and, at certain points I wished for slower and greater in-depth analysis of examples, as Dyers's insights are invaluable. Although Wesbank is described as 'hybrid', the continuous migration flows within and into South Africa may result in urban and rural areas becoming increasingly diverse. Future researchers may well benefit from Dyers's early perceptions into the communicative practices in such communities.