Second Language Literacies in the City: 
New Practices in Urban Spaces of Medellín, Colombia

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AUTHORS’ NOTE
This paper is an abridged report from book chapter draft under review. While others are free and welcome to cite this paper, we kindly ask you to report such interest to the lead author, Dr. Raúl A. Mora, at literaciesinl2project@gmail.com. For more information about the Literacies in Second Languages Project, visit us at http://literaciesinl2project.org. You may also follow us on Twitter (@lslp_colombia) and Facebook.
Abstract

This paper shows the results of a study that described how people in Medellín, Colombia are using English as a communicative resource. Relying on an ethnographic approach, the research team discovered that English appears as an element that helps enrich the complexity of the messages that one finds in urban spaces in the city. These findings expand previous research regarding this new complexity of meanings and defy conventional wisdom that portrays the city as “monolingual”. Instead, the data showed more creative uses of English in advertisements, malls, and restaurants, as well as a growing interest in English literature in bookshops and libraries. Implications for research on second language education in Latin America bookend the discussion.
Colombia has recently faced a growing interest in English, manifested at an official level in graduation requirements, more language centers, the emergence of bilingual spaces in local media, government-led initiatives at the city level aiming at full command of English by 2019, and more resources (in terms of materials, facilities, and staff) to increase the amount (and quality) of English instruction. All these initiatives wish to help students reach a series of benchmark proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), such as a B1 level for college graduates and a B2 for students graduating from preservice English teacher education programs.

While the lack of official status of English holds true in Colombia, that does not mean English is only confined to the classroom practices or the official media. For example, walking around Medellin, one would likely find billboards and store ads that use English words, English texts in local bookshops and libraries, and even English words in graffiti. Nevertheless, there is still very little evidence of how people appropriate English language in the city and its urban spaces (Mora, 2012, 2015).

For the last year and a half, our research team explored, based on some realities of literacy practices outside of the school (Knobel, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1995; Tannock, 2001), how youth and adults in Medellin are recreating English in the city, adding as part of the local culture. We walked the city to discover how people are appropriating and interacting with the English language in different physical spaces of Medellin, in an attempt to debunk the conventional wisdom that English was the domain of the classroom and that English did not really appear as a
communicative resource in the city. This study discussed the following research questions:

1. What kind of English literacy practices can one find across the different urban spaces in the city of Medellín?
2. What means and modes of expression are people using to reflect these literacy practices?
3. What are the implications for the promotion of second languages in our local context?

**Conceptual Framework: The City as Literacy Practice**

The notion of “the city as literacy practice”, an attempt to revisit Freire and Macedo’s (1987) idea of “reading the world and the word,” posits that the city itself is literacy (Author, 2012a). We see the city as a place where different texts converge and help generate a world with a certain identity and layers of expression and understanding. The city, then, becomes a space that is not monochromatic; in order to really understand it, one should engage in a deeper analysis of the diverse textual and semiotic interactions stemming from it. This framework (and the study, as a consequence), acknowledges the multilinear and complex nature of the city as a necessary and relevant aspect to describe and analyze the texts that are immersed in and created by the city.

This framework, on the one hand, acknowledges the influential tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS; Blackburn, 2003; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Hamilton,
2000; Hodge & Jones, 2000; Iddings, McCafferty, & da Silva, 2011; Kell, 2006; Street, 1984, 1995, 2013a, 2013b), which recognizes that literacy is socially situated. Individuals create, recreate, interpret and reinterpret texts according to the different ends and needs of their particular contexts. Based on a work base that covers almost 30 years since Street’s first works (Street, 1984), NLS has studied literacy practices in urban and out-of-school settings (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006).

Nevertheless, we also recognize that today’s complexity of literacy practices in urban spaces requires an extended framework that addresses the evolution of social practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Therefore, we also draw from three recent concepts that help understand and analyze how to rethink text and language today. A reading of all concepts shows the need to, paraphrasing Otsuji and Pennycook (2010), “invent, disinvent, and reconstitute” language in order to understand the new textual manifestations in the city.

The three concepts that will, then, help define this framework are:

- **multimodality** (Albers & Harste, 2007; Kress, 1997, 2003, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Mejía-Vélez & Salazar Patiño, 2014; Mora, 2014a), or the fluid (Kress, 2010) integration of multiple visual, textual, or iconic resources to create meanings that are more impactful than print-only texts.

- **metrolingualism** (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010), an invitation to revisit what the city means to us as a first step to explore how people use language as a means of social interactions.
• *polylanguaging* (Chuquito & Rojas, 2014; Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen & Møller, 2011), or the view of languages as resources that one has at one’s disposal to create messages beyond the traditional boundaries of language proficiency.

The dialectical (Dressman, 2007) relationship of this framework helps create a deeper, symbiotic understanding of the city as a literacy practice (as much as it is a site of literacy practices): Languages create new definitions of city and, at the same time, the city creates new and creative uses of said languages.

**Methodology**

We used an ethnographic approach (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Heath & Street, 2008; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2008; Ramírez & Mora, 2014) for our fieldwork. On the one hand, from a language practice perspective, ethnographic methods enabled the research team to look at language as nuanced and as a social matter. On the other hand, the ethnographic approach enabled us to assume the research enterprise as “constant learner[s] – ever curious as to what’s happening” (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 30).

**Physical Urban Spaces as Routes**

We chose the idea of the “route” (inspired by Stuart Hall’s idea of culture [Willis, Hall, Montavon, Hunter, & Herrera, 2008]) as the approach to understand the culture of English literacies that we may find in these urban spaces. For this project, we selected routes that linked English practices to specific physical spaces
(Edwards & Usher, 2008) where one could pinpoint the emergence of said practices. The student researchers focused on three specific spaces, based on their own affinities (Black, 2009) with those spaces and the language practices that may emerge there, as follows: (a) restaurants, (b) advertisements, and (c) malls, bookshops, and libraries.

**Data Sources and Fieldwork**

We conducted our fieldwork between March, 2013 and June, 2014. In the first stage (March, 2013-January, 2014), our data sources included observations, ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), and photographs (Hodge & Jones, 2000; Marquez-Zenkov & Harmon, 2007). In the second stage (January-June, 2014), the student researchers conducted in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006; Mora Vélez, 2010) with key informants from each routes.

**Data Analysis**

We began our analysis from the beginning of fieldwork (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To create the categories, we relied on our conceptual framework and the preliminary data we collected between September and November, 2012. After our discussions of the conceptual framework, vis-à-vis the initial data set, we agreed on the following categories for our analysis:

**Multimodal messages.** Using the ideas about language use in literacy research and the notion of multimodality, this category analyzed how multiple semiotic resources (Kress, 2010) merged with English texts to convey diverse meanings.
**English as a resource.** Relying on the idea of polylanguaging (Jørgensen, et al., 2011), this category described how the participants used language resources at their disposal, and what kinds of messages they are producing in English.

**Social interactions through English.** Based on Otsuji and Pennycook’s (2010) understanding of metrolingualism, we analyzed how English enhanced social interactions in these routes.

**English in the City: Moments of Interplay and Language Diversity**

We will highlight some of the lessons that our team learned during this journey. In this path, which also included a number of previous conference presentations (Mora, N. Gómez, Castaño, Pulgarín, Ramírez, & Mejía-Vélez, 2013; Mora & Ramírez, 2014; Mora, Ramírez, Pulgarín, Mejía-Vélez, Castaño, & N. Gómez, 2014), we have discovered a much broader variety of language use in the city than what other profiles (e.g. Velez-Rendon, 2003; González, 2010) had envisioned.

**Language Use in the Advertisement Route.**

Our observations indicate that the use of English has begun to transcend the traditional uses of apostrophes (Velez-Rendon, 2003) or isolated words to more complex messages. At first sight, it seemed that the emergence of second languages (Mora, 2013) was mostly a fad or a causality relationship (English seemed to appear where there were more tourists). However, as we moved all over the city and we interviewed our key informants, we learned that mere appearance was not the main factor for choosing names and messages in stores.
Our interviews showed how the owners of these places are interested to show something different (that with time and practice becomes of normal) in their business. They wanted to show something different from the norm to draw the attention of not only citizens, but also of foreigners and tourists. In some of the interviews conducted, shop owners expressed that they knew very well what the names of their establishments meant in the languages they chose (even if they themselves reported a lower proficiency level in English). Shop owners also reported that their choices of English had a great deal to do with the growing presence of English and other languages more in the city, thus providing a way for them to remain current with the trends within the city and as a way to trigger interest in customers or users.

**Language Use in the Restaurant Route**

Our explorations of restaurants across the city revealed that, as was the case of advertisements, names in English and other languages appear more often and beyond the traditional examples that Velez-Rendon (2003) pointed out in her research. One interesting finding is that, while the appearance of restaurants with names and menus in other languages is a phenomenon across the city, it is not uncommon anymore to find clusters of restaurants where multiple languages appear in the names and menus. Whether this surge may have any relationship with the emerging numbers of immigrants in the city remains a question, one that we might explore at a different time in our research team.

**Language Use in the Malls, Bookshops, and Libraries Route**
Our findings in this route confirm what the other two are discovering: One can no longer describe Medellín as a “monolingual city”. We must acknowledge the presence of English and different second languages in public places. The emergence of said languages has also triggered new and varied cultural spaces where, for instance, English may no longer be a rarity. Our interviews with store owners have shown personal narratives and experiences with other languages as deciding factors in the selection of names (our interviews in the other two routes confirmed this assertion). In the case of bookshops and libraries, while we are yet to have a critical mass of English literature, there are more patrons asking for books in English. In some libraries and bookshops, the English section now is a more visible portion of the setting. There is a growing concern about librarians about the promotion of English literacy in their spaces, as a response to the growing interest for second languages in the city.

A New Form of Indexicality?

Our findings indicate the emergence of a new form of indexicality (Blommaert, 2015; Collins & Slembrouch, 2007). We found this in two specific instances. On the one hand, some of the messages in malls and ads involved references to irony, inspiration and even sexual innuendo as elements to draw attention. On the other, we found examples of foul language immersed in the names of clothing brands and restaurants. While this is an emerging topic in our findings, researchers such as Blommaert (personal communication, 26/08/14) have suggested that this should in fact be a full line of future inquiry in our research.
Implications

Through our analysis, we have learned that English and other languages are now an important element of the new language ecologies (Mora, 2014b) of our city. While far from the full-fledged multilingual cities in Europe or parts of Asia, the assumption that “one might not find any use of English here” is far from the actual truth. Medellín may not be a plurilingual city, but it is very well a “polylinguaged” (Jørgensen, et al., 2011) one. English is a veritable language resource that enriches the complexity of messages that one discovers across the city. These languages provide more complex multimodal messages where it is not enough to factor in modes (Kress, 2010) such as images, colors, or sounds. Now each language, we argue, may very well be a mode in and of itself, making more “kaleidoscopic” (Heath & Street, 2008) messages.

We believe that this study, as well as the ensuing umbrella project that it spawned (which now includes two more projects in progress, several senior and master’s theses, and growing international research partnerships) is a valuable contribution for research in the field of second languages (Mora, 2013b). Our framework, with its complexity, may enable researchers to broaden their scope to describe how languages make part of today’s messages in urban spaces. This study also contributes to the growing research in second languages in what was otherwise called “the forgotten continent” (Friedrich & Berns, 2003). Research on literacies in second languages, at least in Colombia and Latin America, is a very novel field, with very few researchers leading the path.
That makes this study, its ongoing second phase (Mora, Giraldo, Chiquito, Uribe & Ramírez, 2015; Mora, Salazar Patiño, M. Gómez, & Mejía Vélez), and all our work at the Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP; Mora, 2015, in press) a growing space for scholarship. We believe that our research will contribute to making this field a relevant option to understand how languages operate in our contemporary language ecologies, especially in a place so diverse and nuanced as Latin America.

References


of English literacy practices in urban spaces in Medellin. Presentation at the 19th Conference of the International Association for World Englishes, Arizona State University, USA.


