Scales and the actual global in the study of children’s engagements with electronic media, language and literacy

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The paper presents a study of children engaging with electronic media, language and literacy in a township setting, and examines the ideas of language and literacy as social practice and of scales theory in sociolinguistics as a development in practices theory. Scales theory offers a systemic view of globalisation with literacy, language and new media resources carrying social capital in situated ways within specific social economies: where each context (local, regional, national, global) has its own “orders of indexicality” which assign meanings, values and statuses to diverse codes. I question the assumption that complexity is synchronous and scaled, however, and explore an alternative through the ideas of global forms and global assemblages. Global forms are widely distributed resources (conceptual, organizational, procedural, ideological resources) that are assembled and adapted in distinctive ways at local and regional levels, and articulated in specific situations. They include language, literacy and media objects and resources, define new material, collective and discursive relationships and interact with other resources and elements in a mix of global constructs and more localized discourses and preoccupations. These interactions might be called the actual global. This orientation argues against the macro/micro conceptual frame of scales theory, or suggests that we attend to multiple scales with no single scale treated as foundational or determinant. I describe how youths and electronic resources position each other, where youths draw on widely circulating forms and resources as well as locally developed constructs of value, status and identity. In contrast with a practices approach that studies youths’ engagement with digital media in these contexts as a scaled activity I focus on the specificity of the actual global and the sometimes unexpected nature of assemblages which grounded research uncovers.

Keywords: digital, scales, assemblages.