Confronting multilingual spaces: Cameroonian learners in a South African school

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This paper traces the trajectories of two young Cameroonian learners as they engage in new social and educational spaces in a South African primary school. The context is a low socio-economic suburb of Cape Town, South Africa, where new discourses and practices of identity, class, ‘race’ and ethnicity become entangled with local economies of meaning. Using observational, interview, and recorded interactional data, we illustrate the ways in which two learners from the same country entering the same school position themselves and are differentially positioned within evolving discourses of inclusion and exclusion. We analyse the semiotic strategies they use to try and re-anchor their ‘unmoored’ multilingual repertoires (Phipps, 2013) and to construct, negotiate or resist new identities within shifting ‘power geometries’ (Massey, 1993).

Methodologically the research is situated within Linguistic Ethnography which brings together Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) and ethnography. IS yields insights into the workings of social processes in asymmetrical encounters (Gumperz, 1982) while Hymesian ethnography as a ‘democratic and anti-hegemonic science’ offers ‘voice to the subjects it studie[s]’ (Blommaert, 2009, p. 258).

References


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