Negotiating orders of time and space: Language, literacy and material objects in interaction

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The paper explores material objects as part and focus of literacy activities alongside language and examines their role in projecting meaning across time, space and activity. Building on work in social semiotics (Scollon & Scollon 2003) I consider objects as agents of embodied meaning which contribute to the distribution of social meaning in important ways. Taking this work further conceptually, I propose a framework for studying trajectories of meaning making (Kell 2009), taking into account the trajectory of objects, people and the conditions of locally situated meaning making in social interaction. For this paper, I focus on linguistically mediated meaning making around objects and how a moment to moment analysis reveals the interactive construction of conceptions of time and space. Such a focus is interesting as concepts of time and space underlie the understanding of social processes in fundamental ways. To illustrate this hypothesis empirically, the paper refers to two ethnographic collaborative projects, 1) on multilingual literacies of urban Inuit in Ottawa, 2) on artifactual literacies in a former steel factory at the French-German border, since 1996 the first World Heritage Site of industrial production.

Looking at educational, literacy-based activities in both sites, it is noticeable that contrasting conceptions of time and space emerged from the interaction around objects. In both settings conventional spatial-temporal frames collapsed due to the nature and spatial arrangement of objects and the ways in which they were interpreted by the different participants, Inuit women in the first study; a tour guide and students exploring machinery and art work of the industrial site in the second. In both cases, conventional scaling as an ordering principle in Western historiography and science was challenged; either by fostering new links between spatiotemporal frames; or by enacting an understanding which treats time and space as fluid rather than fixed categories.

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