

Living and Dying Literacies: Metaphors of Language and Literacy Emergence, Temporality and Forgetting in Practice

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Abstract

Although some theorists conceive of literacy as an active practice (e.g., Street, 1984), popular framings of literacy still rely on teleological and mechanistic models. Commonplace descriptors, such as *having* literacy, *possessing* a literacy toolkit, and *mastering* a language (Common Core Standards, 2014; Gee, 2013), fail to capture the activity and liveliness of literacy practice. Employing a cognitive theory of metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1990) and drawing on dynamic systems perspectives, this paper critiques dominant framings of language and literacy and offers new metaphors to think with. We examine extant literature and analyze our biographies qua language learners in order to (a) consider affordances and constraints of commonly employed frames and (b) propose alternative frames that foreground literacies in practice, as they are living and dying.

Objectives

Many theorists and researchers have conceptualized the flows of language and literacy (Leander, 2008; Luke & Carrington, 2003). Less theorized remain the ebbs. This paper proposes conceptual and methodological considerations that move the fields of the learning sciences and literacy studies away from metaphors of literacy as a positive and permanent quality of persons once “acquired.” Although some theorists highlight dynamic, hybrid, and dialogical properties of language and literacy, owing much to sociocultural theory (Bakhtin, 1981; Bokhorst-Heng & Silver, 2017; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014; Vygotsky, 1980) we argue that the dominant metaphors in the field still presume a static and economic nature of literacy, using terms that assume the ability to “acquire,” “own” and “use” a language (Norton, 1997). However, in our own lived experience, the literacies we claim to “master” at one point prove to be slippery, shape-shifting, and contingent.

In this paper, we ask:

1. In what ways do dominant metaphors for literacy and language fail to account for different lived experiences of literacy phenomena?
2. What new metaphors might provide more dynamic ways of thinking about the transformations of literacy practices over time?

To answer these questions, we review extant literature and consider the dominant frameworks guiding literacy theory, research, and interventions. Simultaneously, we engage in a dialogic meditation on the temporality of literacies across lifespan, drawing on our own experiences as immigrants and second language learners. Dialogically weaving together stories from our lives, we describe and discover our literacies to be heterogeneously and idiosyncratically self-organized, temporally and tentatively held, and intentionally and imperfectly carried and cared for.

Conceptual Frameworks

Two key perspectives inform our theoretical exploration and contribution: 1) cognitive theory of metaphor (CTM) and 2) dynamic systems theory (DST).

Cognitive Theory of Metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson (1979) posited that metaphors play a key role in cognitive functioning, shaping how we make sense of complex personal and social phenomena and in turn guiding not only our thinking but also our action. In the process of appropriating mental models from one place to another, however, metaphors selectively highlight some aspects of the concept, while occluding others. Linguist Michael Reddy (1975) argued that English descriptions of language and communication are undergirded by a persistent “conduit metaphor.” In this hypothesis, language is routinely thought to function as a channel for conveying meaning via a process of packaging thoughts into word containers, transferring them via speech or writing, and the extraction of the meaning from the words by the listener/reader. While the conduit metaphor is admittedly efficient, Reddy critiqued it for being objectivist and representing language and communication as a standardized procedure, rather than the messy, subjective, constructivist and idiosyncratic processes in human practices (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1980).

Recently, cognitive theories of communication and learning have been dominated by the similarly limiting information processing metaphor – e.g. mind as computer that encodes and decodes bits of data/meaning (Anderson, 1982). The problem with using efficient and vivid metaphors to explain complex human phenomena such as communication is that they fail to capture the complexity of these phenomena.

Ortony (1975) proposed three hypotheses for *why* metaphors are important for thinking and research: compactness, vividness and inexpressibility. Comparing a specific, multi-causal phenomenon to a situation or process that is prototypical and familiar (compact) allows us to quickly build a model of that

situation: a metaphor is thus a vehicle for transferring some “chunks” of the experience. Many aspects of experiences we try to communicate however are impossible to transfer in all their specificity and detail; they are inexpressible. A well-chosen metaphor can compactly and vividly evoke these aspects. Ortony uses the example of “a thought slipped my mind like a squirrel behind a tree” which captures not just the slippage of the idea, but also “ungraspableness, suddenness, nimbleness, deceptively easy to catch, camouflage and many others” (1975, p. 49). Because literacy does not have one “essence” (Scribner, 1984) it is incumbent upon us as literacy researchers and teachers to stop essentializing literacies and instead name, cultivate, respect, and protect the dynamic processes embedded in each literacy, living and dying.

Dynamic Systems Theory

Recently, scholars have taken up Dynamic Systems Theory to explain issues in human development, cognition, and learning (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Thelen, 2003; Karimi-Aghdam, 2017; De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007). This view assumes that the phenomena in question are less predictable, mechanistic and linear than previously established, and are complex systems. DST foregrounds the importance of multiple simultaneous interacting factors. These do not act in isolation but coordinate with each other in unpredictable ways to produce heterogeneous and idiosyncratic states that also continue to dynamically change over time. The notion of time, as a continuous plane on which processes recursively iterate and re-assemble component parts, producing variegated effects, is the key missing ingredient in many current metaphors of literacy and language learning, which remain if not static, then *time-less*. From a DTS perspective, interdependence and impermanence are the fundamental characteristics of systems. However, like the complex processes of emergence, DST is difficult to understand (Chi, 1992), in part because our everyday language doesn't provide many conceptual resources for thinking dynamically about situations. Instead, we tend to reduce and simplify complex phenomena, such as through the use of

convenient and common metaphors. In this paper, we attempt to develop new metaphors that better account for the dynamic nature of language and literacy practice.

Modes of Inquiry

The present investigation emerged from two converging aspects of the authors' biographies: our graduate training as literacy researchers and our similar histories immigrating to the United States from Russian Federation at the age of 12. These similar although not shared pasts (we first met at an academic conference as adults) led us to contemplate together phenomenological experiences related to literacy that our scholarly theories failed to explain. To explore these experiences further, we engaged in an autobiographical dialogue in face-to-face conversation and email, using our knowledge of relevant literature and personal histories to open up existing theories and generate new conceptions of living and dying language-in-practice. Specifically, we adopted the genre of a Literacy History Interview (Duffy, 2007; Vieira, 2016), developing 14 interview questions to probe into the differences and similarities of our first and second language development and practice, which we both answered for each other through email. We queried each other's mental models of language, early schooling experiences, liminal experiences of adolescent immigration, relationships to other people and languages, and minute moments of remembering and forgetting (e.g., slips of tongue).

We then collaboratively read and responded to our interview answers, identifying and selecting focal literacy episodes that highlighted similarities and variations in our literacy development, noting prevalent metaphors we used for different phenomenological experiences, and comparing these to the dominant theoretical lenses in learning, language, and literacy studies. After several rounds of coding, these prompted biographical explorations yielded 50 framings which we mapped on and oriented to existing literature.

In weaving together literature and life stories to generate new ideas, we take a cue from post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2014) and aim to develop “futural concepts”– concepts that have “their own speeds and rhythms that slow us down because they don’t fit existing ontologies and so open things up, helping us think new modes of being” (St. Pierre, 2014, p.14). Locating lapses in the relevant literature, while at the same time accounting and processing lapses in our language histories, paves the path to consider literacy emergence, temporality, remembering, and forgetting.

Findings

Metaphors of Literacy in Literature

In a study of the social and intellectual consequences of literacy development among the Vai people of West Africa (Scribner & Cole, 1981), anthropologist Silvia Scribner put forth three metaphors of literacy that animate thinking about literacy and language acquisition: adaptation, state of grace, and power. Each of these answers to the question “what is literacy?” imply a different set of affordances and constraints. Specifically, they define “the scope of the problem (i.e., the extent of illiteracy)” and assume “different objectives for programs aimed at the formation of a literate citizenry” (1984, n.p.).

The metaphors we use for literacy have direct implications for how it is studied, taught, and popularly understood. We reviewed influential texts in literacy theory to create a heuristic typology of the predominant metaphors used in the field to describe literacy and language practices. We found two primary dimensions of variation: (1) dynamism vs statism and (2) economic vs ecological.

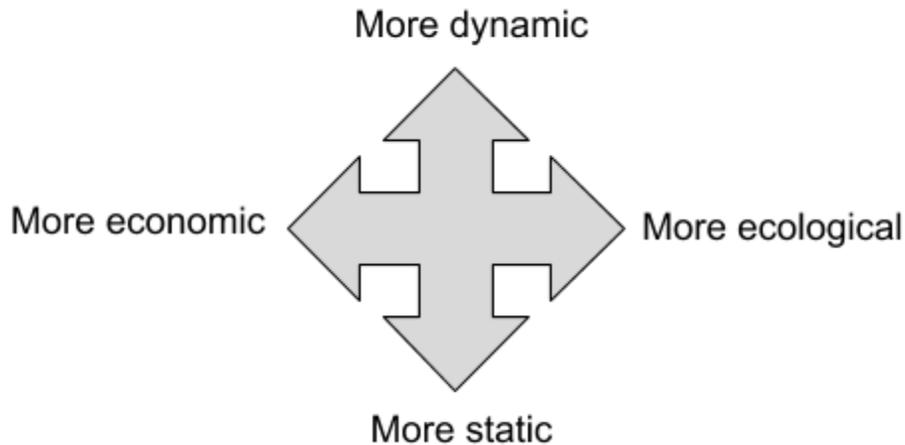


Figure 1. Metaphoric Tendencies in Literacy Studies

Dynamism and Statism

The first dimension in which frames of literacy differ is dynamism. Some metaphors of literacy in prior research and theory foreground the development of literacy as teleological, mechanistic, and static. The Common Core depends on this kind of statism by using phrasing such as “acquiring words” and “demonstrating command of standard English” (Common Core Standards, 2014). Such language frames literacy as a quality that is possessed, permanently: once you “have” it, you cannot “lose” it.

More dynamic is the metaphor of language and literacy as tools that users can take up as needed (Gee, 2015; Moje et al., 2001). This framing separates the literacy from the user: literate individuals hold “a toolkit” in which specific literacies and languages may be included. In the same vein, the Russian language emphasizes dynamism with the phrase носитель языка (nositel’ yazyka; carrier of language). This framing stresses the carrier of language as an agent, a caretaker, and transporter. The same is true of the sociocultural framing of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). These kinds of frames provide more room for language and literacy participant agency and the ebb and flow of engaging in the literacy, although none of these reach the level of dynamism as characterized by DTS, where literacy and language practice is a complex system resulting from interdependent and impermanent interactions of many internal and external components.

Economy and Ecology

Metaphors for literacy acquisition often borrow terms from the fields of economics and ecology. Consider the language of funds (Moll et al., 1992), sponsors (Brandt, 1998), investments (Norton & Darwin, 2015), capital (Bourdieu, 1977). These metaphors have gained traction in capitalist society, where economic transactions between materialist and immaterialist goods may define the self (Vujnovic, 2017). Although often tongue-in-cheek, these frames foreground a vision of literacy that is economic and static (Patel Stevens, 2011).

Other frames emphasize more organic and dialectical themes in language and literacy practices; we will call them ecological. In a sense, framing literacies as human practices lends itself to ecological perspectives. Discourses of languaging and literacy practice as movement (Vossoughi & Gutierrez, 2014), as embodiments (Leander & Boldt, 2012), and as a seed (Massengill & Mahlios, 2008) carry with them affordances to understand language and literacy as emergent, temporal, and embodied practices. Such ecological frames can help us build toward a more nuanced understanding of language and literacy as living, breathing, and dying beings that need to be carried, transported, and cared for -- perhaps like pets or plants (cf. Haraway, 2008).

Themes, frames, and metaphors in our literacy histories

Our own experiences as two second language learners, navigating and negotiating various relations in life and the academy, build on and complicate existing models and metaphors of literacy. In sharing our personal language and literacy stories with one another through the theoretical lenses we have acquired as academics, we found that we interchanged different metaphors for particular moments in our literacy histories. Familiar with current models of literacy that place a premium on social practices, activities, and contexts, we nonetheless struggled to locate phrases and theories to stand for our messy lived realities of languaging. For example, we often used economic terms of investment, currency, capital,

poverty, and wealth, to refer to our relations of acquiring English while already possessing Russian. We applied existing terms with qualifiers and reflexive humor. For example, Ksenia writes of her experience starting a specialized English-focused school as a child:

For this teacher, my first teacher, from the special school of course, I brought flowers on the first day of school that were taller than myself: red gladioli. I suppose that the size of the flowers was meant to represent our investment in school literacy: we had brought it.

Relatedly, Natalia reflects on the role of bilingualism in shaping her identity by appropriating economic terminology:

I feel rich “having” two languages. I feel wealthier than other people and poorer than others who have more languages than I do.

In both of the above reflections, we are notably self-conscious about the language of possession, transaction, and acquisition, even as we find it useful to describe our particular feelings and experiences. The self-consciousness comes from a mutual recognition of the contingency of this economic frame. Dominant conceptions and measures of literacy often rely on additive, linear models: once you are proficient or have a language in your toolkit, it stays there. But our longitudinal lived experiences contest these models and highlight the need to frame languaging practice as dynamic, temporal, fragile and requiring of attention, care, and cultivation. Part of the motivation for this project was admitting to each other moments of failure, slippage, and forgetting of Russian. For example, Natalia shares an experience of “losing” a color:

when I was 21 or 22 I signed up for a Linguistic study specifically for Russian-English speakers. I sat at a computer and had to type out names for various kinds of cups and containers. It was funny to me because when a container was small I would just add a diminutive to it like “stakanchik” [little cup] or “tarelochka” [little plate] — I anticipated that I might be wrong but it

was interesting. Then the researchers showed me reproductions of Picasso's Blue Period and asked me to describe them in Russian. I described them as "sinie" [blue typically in the indigo spectrum] and then she asked - what are the names for blue in Russian and I remembered that there was also "goluboy" [light blue], but I had lost it, or was not accessing it in the moment.

We compared moments when we had begun dreaming in English as bittersweet transitions to our new dominant culture, and lamented the increasing limitations on where and how we spoke Russian.

Ksenia writes:

college me began to see the paucity of our home linguistic practices. Through trauma, distance, and the loss of vocab, our Russian has become especially kitchenified.

Natalia:

Since my Russian now is just family kitchen Russian sometimes my mother and I will talk in pure indexicals and conjunctions - "nu eto kak, a vot tam kak? Nu ladno" [and this, how, and there, what? So, okay] and understand each other.

In these excerpts, we both identify moments of language loss and shrinkage, experiencing the change to our literacy practices as both linguistic (fewer nuanced words in our repertoire) and cultural (fewer things to talk about) poverty.

Affective Intensities

The sadness and shame we experienced around our perceived losses – as opposed to the pride and celebration of our linguistic “wealth” in the earlier examples – led us both to moments of intentional language cultivation. Natalia writes:

Sometimes I go through periods of Russian nostalgia. I mourn the youth / expression / connection / community I could have had if I had more time to grow up there, and I'll go through a phase of listening to Russian music or watching Russian television or reading contemporary poetry.

Whereas Natalia reports experiencing Russian nostalgia in spurts, followed by cultural consumption binges, Ksenia had a substantive period of re-engagement with Russian cultural and literary texts. She writes:

I went to college pretty closeby, but ironically with a pronounced homesickness and a sense of seeking (once again, I want to say these things all passed but nothing ever leaves). It seems that early college is a time when identities become articulated and I tried to really articulate my Russianness. With a painstaking good-girl purism, I sat in the Russian section of the library and read things, listened to current rock like Zemfira, Zverboi, Russkoe Radio, challenged all to say my name, took classes on Slavic literature and culture.

Unlike the economic investment into English or the possessive description of bilingualism, these moments of cultivation are motivated by affective desires and intensities (Leander & Boldt, 2012), a seeking of a personal *sense* of something rather than an accomplishment or demonstration of it. Rather than a fixed possession, our phenomenological experiences with gains and losses of language lend themselves to more animated and agentic framings. As Leander & Boldt (2012) write in their study of Lee, a 10 year old boy spending his Sunday reading and spontaneously acting out a Japanese manga graphic novel, texts are “artifacts of literacy practice, but do not describe practice itself. What emerges is the production of desire in which Lee does not aim to produce texts but to use them, to move with and through them, in the production of intensity” (p. 25). Like Lee, our respective late-adolescent engagements with Russian media are not oriented towards scholastic or economic gain, nor do they emerge out of some obvious or social interest. In fact, in describing our temporary relationships with Russian music, films, and literature, we might offer the same comment Lee does about spending a Sunday with his favorite anime: “I don’t know why I love this so much, but I do” (p. 27).

Dynamic Social Systems and Contexts

While we both already identified as socio-cultural literacy researchers, analyzing our own literacy histories revealed the profound importance of social systems and contexts for literacy emergence and development. For example, both of our early childhood memories included instances of family members inciting and encouraging reading and writing practice in Russian, and nudging us towards learning English. Natalia's father brought her home "a glossy English textbook" years before she could take a second-language class. Ksenia's family expected her to perform English songs during holiday gatherings. Later, when both of us found our Russian slipping, due in part to geographic and conversational distance from our families, parents and siblings supported the survival of Russian in other ways: Natalia's mother offered to write her letters in Russian, while Ksenia's family helped with heritage classes in college. We also documented increasing mixing in language practices as family structures changed to include new siblings, friends, and romantic partners. For example, Ksenia writes:

*My brother Sasha, born in the USA five days after 9/11, introduced a lot of hybridity into our languaging. With an innocence and candor he broke all the rules we built around Russian vs English worlds. He mixed grammars, words, places with such cuteness that it infiltrated our kitchen Russian. Exhibit 1: *Muhis* [the word for "house flies" with English 's' as added pluralization] are cute. When figuring out his problems -- homework or life -- we all increasingly speak English at home. Just as relatives can lift crazy-heavy things when their loved ones are in danger, our family can use the foreign tongue when helping Sasha, even in the house.*

In analyzing our parallel and varied literacy stories, we noted the way changes to our family and social dynamics— moving, meeting other Russian speakers, or immersing more deeply into American communities— created perturbations in our language systems that we could not easily predict. DST reminds us that "dynamic systems are characterized by what is called *complete interconnectedness*: all variables are interrelated, and therefore changes in one variable will have an impact on all other variables

that are part of the system” (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2007, pg. 8). Tracing our literacy histories through the lens of dynamic systems makes us realize that both our own and other people’s seemingly unrelated decisions can become variables in a long-term dynamic language trajectory.

Carriers of Language

As our respective literacy histories progress over time into adulthood and academia, we struggle to find theories and metaphors to capture increasing feelings of grief, distance, shame, and disappointment about our changing relationship to our first language. Natalia calls Russian a “wasted gift” or “a pair of shoes that are too small,” big enough only to fit her 12 year old self, but fantasizes about reading Vygotsky and Bakhtin in the original. Ksenia appropriates Gee’s “toolkit” metaphor but says “the tools keep disappearing.” We borrow organic processes as descriptors: language rusts like metal, or requires periodic infusions, like an injection of the vitamin B12. Other times we veer towards abstract, mathematical relations. Ksenia says taking heritage classes in college made her realize Russian was “just another axis to be judged and evaluated on”— a new uncomfortable dimension placed on something that has previously felt homey and intimate. Natalia talks about immersing into a new language as “playing a game to which you never know all the rules.” Eventually, we both converge on the idea that our relationship to language and literacy is less like ownership or possession, and more like something we temporarily and tentatively *hold*, as the Russian phrase носитель языка (*nositel’ yazyka*; carrier of language) suggests. We imagine that this act of holding, carrying, and caring for our languages compels us to conceive of our position to language as its stewards, cultivators, guardians, rather than owners or masters— relationships that imply domination over something inanimate or enslaved. The language of carrying and caring for a living organism that requires a supportive ecology to survive also helps to explain how changes in the language’s environment (e.g. distance from Russian-speaking family, the arrival of American-born siblings, or increasing relations with non-Russian-speaking friends and romantic partners) can make us put the language “down” for a while or neglect its health, and eventually discover

that parts of it have withered and died (such as the “lost” color). Following this logic, we can characterize times of increased attention to language, such as Natalia’s media binges and Ksenia’s painstaking library sessions, as phases of intentional cultivation, tending, fertilizing, and reviving our literacies. By conceptualizing literacy as a relationship to living and dying organisms whose survival we consider important for the continuation of our own identities, we attempt to move away from the economic, possessive, and evaluative metaphors that trap language in objective, instrumental, and representational frames.

Conclusion

Attempts at describing our changing literacy histories reveal that time and other interacting factors (e.g., research studies and courses at our educational institutions, changing family dynamics, random encounters with strangers) continuously act on our language practices in dynamic and non-obvious ways. Following Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1990), this paper treats metaphors and linguistic frames as powerful, consequential, and laden with implications. We argue that if literacy is economic, like capital or currency, it exists within a complex, volatile economy that changes over time and in relation to weather, context, and market innovation; in other words, it must be seen as *dynamic*, continuously in process. But privileging literacy’s economic value and linear and intentional acquisition can prevent us from recognizing its organic and ecological aspects. A living literacy is influenced by aleatoric elements of contexts, such as proximity of other non-dominant language speakers, by non-rational affective intensities, such as desire or sadness, and is subject to non-accumulative organic processes such as aging, atrophy, corrosion, and death. Building upon our exploratory literature review of categories of literacy framings, we tried different metaphors on for size in attempts to capture, process, and compare our living language histories.

In this paper, we propose that the recognition of alternative frames for language learning and literacy ushers in novel approaches to researching and teaching these constructs. Appropriating more dynamic and ecological metaphors for literacy practices helps us recognize, research, and work with the interdependent and impermanent knowledges our students (and we ourselves) carry, and the ways in which we care *for* them. At the same time, attunement to the staying power and prowess of economic framings of language development can yield insightful analyses and conversations. As we continue to language about language, renewed energy around consequential frames, coupled with mixes of methodological approaches, disciplines, theories, the personal and the abstract, will lead to a more holistic and critical accounting of literacy.

While borrowing environmental and ecological metaphors, we do not advocate for linguistic conservation as an ideological strategy. Instead, we propose pedagogical frames of cultivation, evolution and stewardship to guide a more conscious research agenda that accounts for the complex processes involved in living (and dying) systems of language and literacy. We imagine future studies that ask: how might learning environments provide the conditions to *cultivate* a variety of language and literacy practices? How do language practices *evolve* in immigrants over time? What interventions might support *literacy stewardship* in adults? These inquiries are pertinent to the motivating questions for this year's conference theme; in particular, the call to respect the particularities of cultures, times, and places, while learning sensitively from one another's contemporary experiences and histories.

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