Exploring the Narratives of Tattoos and Graffiti as Second Language Literacies in the City

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Abstract

Since 2013, our research team has discovered that English is no longer "foreign" to Colombian language ecologies. As a follow-up to our initial research on physical spaces, this study provides a more personal dimension of these second language literacies. Through our conceptual framework of "city as literacy" and narrative ethnography as our method of inquiry, our data inquires on why urban dwellers choose to write words in English on their skin (tattoos) and on the walls of our city (graffiti). Our data indicates that the particular affordances of English, including its choices of language economy, provide more powerful alternative and mores spaces for transgression for these second language users to explore their own heritage, social situatedness, and identity at large.

Introduction

Since 2013, our research team in Colombia (Mora, 2015) has become interested in discovering how English continues to emerge as a social literacy practice in diverse urban spaces of Medellín. In the first phase of our project (Mejía-Vélez & Pulgarín, 2015; Mora & Ramírez, 2014; Mora, M Castaño, N Gómez, Mejía-Vélez, Ramírez, & Pulgarín, 2015; Mora, Mejía-Vélez, Ramírez, & Pulgarín, 2016), we explored the kinds of literacies present in physical spaces (i.e. those attached to edifices and static constructions). Our findings indicated new configurations for the local language ecologies (Mora, 2014b), including more expansive forms of indexicality (Blommaert, 2015; Collins & Slembrough, 2007), featuring ideas related to "irony, inspiration, and sexual innuendo" (Mora, et al., 2015), as well as overt references to foul language in titles.

As we discovered these new literacies in second languages, a larger question began to emerge because of feedback and our group meetings: What do these literacies look like from the vantage point of the city inhabitants? We had a clear landscape of how English had evolved in the city in over ten years (Velez-Rendon, 2003) and we have started raising questions about the potential effects of our findings in the curriculum and policy (Mora, 2015). Some of first findings had also showed that there are personal choices beyond trendy issues that drive people to resort to English as a literacy resource. From these findings, we transitioned from looking at the fixed, physical spaces we had looked on our first study to what we were describing as *cultural* spaces (spaces that were more mobile and more closely linked to personal trends and social narratives). .

Two areas of inquiry emerged from our initial explorations of physical spaces: tattoos (Jones, 2013; Kirkland, 2009; Leader, 2015) and graffiti (Franco, 2010; Hampton, Dare, Hyke, & Juice, 2013; Iddings, McCafferty, & da Silva, 2011). We began to first inquire about tattoos and the narratives behind them organically: by exploring the personal narratives of our researchers. From our group of authors, both Raúl and Tatiana each have tattoos (for Raúl. actually opening up to talk about why he had his was a consequence of our research) and they have very strong narratives behind them. We also began to notice the presence of more people with tattoos (including quite a few preservice teachers in our program) across our university campus. As we kept observing, we could notice more messages in English as part of these tattoos. In the case of graffiti, in our observations of advertisements for the first study (Mora, et al., 2015, 2016), we had already begun to notice the appearance of words and phrases in English, both in what seemed moments of tagging (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007) and more artistic forms of graffiti (Hampton, et al., 2013).

The literature on tattoo and graffiti has already documented existing narratives behind them. In the case of tattoos, both Kirkland (2009) and Leader (2015) did extensive narratives about the personal narratives behind people's tattoos and the larger social issues in which those tattoos were circumscribed. In the case of graffiti, both Franco (2010) and Hampton and colleagues (2013) discussed the educational and aesthetic issues related to graffiti creation. Another notable example is the research on graffiti in the streets of São Paulo that Iddings and colleagues (2011) conducted and how these graffiti explored socio-political consciousness in urban environments.

Our research draws inspiration from these works, as we are concerned about the social narratives and potential spaces for critical consciousness that appear in tattoo and graffiti. However, there is an additional area where we take distance from the existing literature: Our interest in looking at how English (and other second languages [Mora, 2013; Uribe & M Gómez, 2015] by extension) plays a role in these narratives, including the choice of English over Spanish, for instance. Like some of these authors, we believe in the power of these literacy practices, and how they represent spaces for agency and embodiment of, in this case, a second language, without disregarding it as a fad or a mere expression of imperialism (Mora, forthcoming), but as a way to expand social narratives as membership in a global community.

This study, part of our growing effort to make sense of literacies in second languages (Mora, 2015) in our city, intends to look carefully at the stories and rationales that propelled getting tattoos and drawing graffiti in different languages beyond Spanish. The following questions help inform our study:

1. What are the counter-narratives behind the choice of tattooing words in other languages on one's skin?
2. What are the counter-narratives behind writing graffiti in English and other languages in a city otherwise assumed as "monolingual"?
3. What are the implications of these counter-narratives for second-language literacy research, curricula, and policy?

Rethinking the Links between Cities and Literacies: The City as Literacy (Revised and Expanded)

From the inception of our research agenda, we have proposed a multi-dimensional framework we titled "The City as Literacy" (Mora, 2015; Mora, et al., 2015, 2016). In our framework, we conceive the city as a site where "Languages create new definitions of city and, at the same time, the city creates new and creative uses of said languages." (Mora, et al. 2015, p. 4). We cannot ignore that literacy and schooling practices, like reading and writing, are an indivisible process in which we see the city involved as a text that is in constant transformation by inhabitants who build communities who communicate in various ways with multiple modes and devices. What was initially a quadrangular framework, featuring ideas from *New Literacy Studies* (Street, 2013), *multimodality* (Kress, 2010; Mejía-Vélez & Salazar Patiño, 2014), *metrolingualism* (Peláez & M Castaño, 2015, Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015), and *polylanguaging* (Chiquito & Rojas, 2014; Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen & Møller, 2011), became pentagonal as a consequence of our new focus. For this stage of our research, we added ideas from *superdiversity* (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Giraldo & S Castaño, 2014)

Each element of the framework provides a particular lens to our research, making it richer. From New Literacy Studies we drew from the notion of literacy practices as socially situated and related to personal practice. The idea of multimodality enabled us to study literacy practices that, despite favoring the print word, also prompted an analysis of spatial modes (e.g. the location of tattoos in the body or the geographical areas where graffiti became more evident), and the synaesthetic (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012) nature of these texts. Metrolingualism contributed a framework to understand these practices as

transient. Graffiti, while affixed to a wall, may disappear at any moment (as our visits to some places in the city attested) and tattoos, while affixed to the body, are part of city dwellers, always on the move. Polylanguaging provided an idea that enabled our research team to detach themselves from traditional ways to look at language, such as actual proficiency or competence, looking instead at interest and resourcefulness as the new factors to analyze these literacies. In this stage of research, superdiversity provided the possibility to understand these practices as part of new ways to construct society that, just as second language literacies, begin to transcend geographical borders to create new forms to conceive culture and identity.

Methodology

We relied on elements from ethnography (Blommaert & Dong, 2010; Heath & Street, 2008; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2004; Ramírez & Mora, 2014), and more specifically narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) to conduct our study. Our reliance in ethnographic methods enabled us, on the one hand, to reinforce the value of having younger researchers (the co-authors are all preservice teachers) walking the city and discovering the existing counter-narratives (Mora, 2014a) related to tattoos and graffiti. We also believe, as Mora (2015) explained, that drawing from features of ethnography helps validate a new sense of what could venture to define "expertise", not as conceptual, but more organic: Our researchers' age, which one may see as a limitation in terms of conceptual framework (but one that our own conceptual writings [Mora, 2016] has proved otherwise), becomes a powerful advantage to gain access to

participants and different settings. We also validate expertise as knowledge of the city and the neighborhoods they inhabit, a necessary step to develop stronger levels of consciousness (Iddings, et al., 2011).

Fieldwork as "Routes". For our fieldwork, we revisited the idea of routes that we used in the previous phase (Mora, et al., 2015, 2016). The idea of routes highlighted the notion that we had to actually walk the city and recognize the narratives in different areas, and not confined to specific, narrower areas of the city. As part of the setup for our fieldwork, all researchers had to draft rationales for the chosen routes. We will present two snippets that we constructed as a team:

***Tattoo as a route*.** Popular culture always tells stories that people get tattoos on a whim, driven by peer pressure, infatuation, or alcohol. Many a movie portray scenes where tattoos express such feelings (or, as in the case of the film Memento, to keep a permanent memory in lieu of the lack of a brain that recalls). However, there is very little evidence of the narratives behind those choices. This study has chosen to zero in on a particular kind of tattoos: Words and messages in languages other than Spanish. In our informal observations, we have noticed people with inspirational messages (albeit with misspellings or grammar issues), song lyrics and poems, or even random words. We have found people with such messages in English, French, or Asian characters. While it would be easy to assume that people are doing that just to be "cool" or "hip", it is not our intent to judge their reasons, but to actually inquire about them. We are very interested in the narratives and counter-narratives (Mora, 2014a; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that will surface in our conversations.

Graffiti as a route. Medellin is a city that has different places where one can see graffiti, which gradually has become recognized as a practice that even coming from street, deserves respect and agglomerate a set of complex processes of language and expression. Not just paint for painting (Hampton, et al, 2013), this is done with a purpose and wishes to convey something. In this sense, it is more interesting to delve into how graffiti is not only images, but also can lead text and new kinds of narratives (Franco, 2010).

Recently, Medellin's government leaders have been a lot more open-minded about graffiti, allowing this practice to go from secrecy to a more accepted way of expression. Thus, the municipality have created spaces in which this artwork can stop being anonymous, and the real artists can be named and recognized for his way of expressing urban culture thoughts.

From this perspective, our team would like to discover the different expressions in the narrative of graffiti when using English as a communicative resource, what means and modes are used to carry the message, what are its implicit purposes , who are the authors of them and why. These questions will lead us to think about graffiti on a different perspective. Finally, looking at these narratives will help us understand how the city sets up new ways to create texts through graffiti and build communication bridges among communities.

Data Sources

We relied on two main data sources for this paper: photographs (Marquez-Zenkov & Harmon, 2007; Zenkov & Harmon, 2009), and semi-structured interviews (Chiquito, 2015; Iddings, et al., 2011). Each data source provided us

with multiple insights about the nature of literacy practices present in graffiti and tattoo. We will explain each data source in more detail:

Photographs. Photographs provide powerful first-hand, historical accounts of how urban literacies shape up over time. In the case of graffiti, we have taken over 150 photographs of graffiti across Medellín. Although the majority of graffiti we have belongs to a city park right next to the Modern Art Museum (*Parque Ciudad del Río*), located in an industrial neighborhood area of the city, we have samples of graffiti that cover a wide range of neighborhoods (*barrios*). We have samples from places near the downtown area, the sports complex, near our university campus, and other areas in the city. For tattoo, we took 17 photographs of tattoos in English and other languages, mostly in wrists and forearms, and a few on the upper back area.

Interviews. Interviews have been instrumental to begin to understand the narratives behind tattoos. We have interviewed both tattoo artists and people with tattoos (4 interviews in total, with more in progress). In the case of graffiti, we are in the process of interviewing local tattoo artists. Interview questions for tattoo artists aimed at discover the trends and rationales that these artists have discovered related to text choices in English and other languages. Interview questions for tattooed individuals sought to learn more about the "reasons and stories behind the choice of tattooing a text in English or other languages" (Interview Protocol).

Data Polyangulation: Recognizing the Multiple Realities of the City… and our Team

Our analysis relies on the presence of multiple realities, both in our data and our research team. As Mertler (2013) argued, such analysis requires a multi-layered analysis, or a process of polyangulation (Mora, 2014d; Mora, Salazar Patiño, Chiquito, & Orrego, 2016), an analytical process that

> [Keeps] in mind the different social realities of the participants, the different milieus where the research takes place, and the nature of the researchers themselves, as a reading of the world where one has to constantly shift the focal point of interpretation. (Defining the term, pa. 2)

For our team, this sense of extended multiple realities of polyangulation also provides a sense of working on our data interpretation, as it invites us to look at all the data sets as a collective team reading exercise, as opposed to the sum of individual analyses. All analysis brings together the team of researchers to look at the data and discuss our findings. Every time we meet to analyze the data, all researchers take interpretive notes, both individual and collective, ensued by a team discussion where we reach a consensus of our initial findings and the further questions we raised in light of looking at the data. For this analysis, we always return to the elements of our conceptual framework to look at the nature of messages, themes and issues raised in the tattoos and graffiti, and uses of English (and other languages) as a communicative resource (without passing judgment on users' actual proficiency in the language).

The Narratives of Tattoo and Graffiti as Literacies in Second Languages

Our look at the data we have collected so far provides, as Heath and Street (2008) expressed, a "kaleidoscopic" view of the multiple stories and reasons behind the appearance of other languages, namely English, to make broader sense of the world. We will share what we have discovered, being aware that incoming data will expand these views as we continue our analysis.

Inking words in English: Issues of identity, affinity… and economy?

In our conversations with the tattoo artists[1], we learned that tattoos in our city have become a more popular affair, where "We have lost the stigma that tattoos are just for criminals and stuff like that" (Interview 1, 03/07/15). In addition, the trend of tattoos in English is not so recent after all, as one of the artists explained, "Sometimes you see the old-fashioned tattoos that sometimes even tattoo with a needle, sometimes you see short phrases in English, so that [phenomenon] comes from years ago, it's not such a recent issue after all" (Interview 1, 03/07/15). As some other tattooists explained, that particular phenomenon is just more noticeable these days.

The range of messages, according to some tattooists, ranges between usual words that have become cliché, such as "infinity" or "stay strong," and the emergence of rap lyrics and prayers (Psalms, according to one artist, seem to be quite popular these days), both from Catholic lore and other religions. On the first interview, one of the artists shared a story, "Sometimes we've had folks coming with Islam phrases… for example a month ago, a French had the Islam

[1] All interviews are originally in Spanish. The lead author translated the vignettes into English.

symbol made on his back, with certain phrases in [Arabic]" (Interview 1, 03/07/15).

In terms of location, most tattooists agreed that the wrists and back are definitely common places to get tattooed, with forearms, collarbone, and shoulder blade among other choices.

Image 1. A brief collection of tattoos in English.

In terms of choosing English over Spanish, there seem to be different schools of thought. Some of the artists seem to be fine with making tattoos in English; however, we found one artists who expressed his reservations, in part because he claimed to lack command of the language. He shared that he always cautioned his customers, "It is your problem if it's poorly translated or misspelled; it stays like that because you brought it like that," adding that he told customers that they would have to face people "asking [them] what [their tattoo] means" (Interview 2, 05/19/15).

However, there was one particular matter that surfaced on our very first interview related to language economy. Both tattooists we interviewed on that session agreed that English had a particular advantage over Spanish. The first artist said,

> Sometimes in Spanish, the text looks too big, so to speak. In English, they shorten a lot of the words and besides, English is a stronger language in terms of pronunciation and what-not… I also think it's about phonetics;

> English phonetics seems to sound better than Spanish, then I think it's more tattoo-able… the way it sounds, also saving skin space… for example, if you're going to make a really big text in Spanish, that would cover a lot of space, so one has to start reducing the font size, and that with time will begin to look like a blot. So, one has to find shorter phrases and also look that words are more visible and larger so that, in a few years, that can still look good aesthetically… well, that's something that has appeared recently because people didn't use to think about that… (Interview 1, 03/07/15)

The other tattooist whom we interviewed in that session added,

> Think about this: if you have to tattoo a full, 3-paragraph phrase, where will you tattoo that so that the font is big enough and it is readable and durable… it would have to be the back or a rib, and then it wouldn't be so aesthetic. (Interview 1, 03/07/15)

Another artist expressed that there was an inextricable link between language choice and aesthetic sense,

> I think it's the same aesthetics that it sounds pretty because for them what's different will obviously be pretty, strange, or appealing, and perhaps the want to tattoo it in that style… because they say it's in English, it sounds pretty, the words are cool, and different from what they are living, which is Spanish. (Interview 2, 05/19/15)

In this same interview, the artist posed a question that, arguably, should also be a matter of inquiry for future research, “I have always wondered if Americans get phrases in Spanish tattooed” (Interview 2, 05/19/15).

Graffiti in English: Spaces of language interplay, identity and transgression. Looking at the graffiti we discovered in the city, English also provided a broad tapestry of expressions. The first thing we discovered, as we did with tattoo, is its ubiquity. We found tattoo in English in roughly 15 different areas of the city, covering north to south and across different social strata. In all these places, tattoo served different purposes. We will highlight a few of them in the next sections.

Identity. Graffiti in English seemed to identify affinity to specific groups, serving a tagging purpose (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). For instance, in one of first searches, we found the graffiti below:

Image 2. Kimera Attack Crew.

A brief Google searches helped us find some information about Kimera Attack Crew. Looking at images on Flickr, we discovered that Kimera Attack Crew, or KAC, is actually a group of graffiti artists from Bogotá, established in 2008, which, according to their Flickr page, "is and will still be standing." Another graffiti we found last year expressed a sense of anger and a feeling of escape related to another group,

Image 3. My Hell is N.N. Crew (found in Buenos Aires neighborhood, northwest of Medellín)

In terms of group identity, we also found several examples of the same name or phrase in different places in the city, as was the case of the word "Meow", found at least twice in two very distinct areas in Medellín,

Image 5. "Meow," a symbol of collective identity?

Social awareness. In a similar vein to some of the findings by Iddings and colleagues (2011), we discovered graffiti with messages for social conscience.

Image 6. Socially-conscious graffiti.

This image was a graffiti painted on a bench. One can easily imply that "feeling green" has an environmental meaning.

Image 7. A sample of socially-conscious graffiti.

This graffiti with the message "don't be racist" and the panda bear also brings a reference to a quote often found on the internet, "Be like a panda: he's black, he's white, he's Asian." The combination of the graffiti and the internet, one could

argue, is also providing a wide range of options for artists whose second language is English to increase their range of messages.

As we actually discovered in our previous study (Mora, 2014c), profanity also made its presence in different graffiti across the city. The messages containing profanity were usually for social protest against the system, society, or as it seemed in the graffiti we found in 2014, war:

Image 8. Graffiti against war.

Randomness. Just like we learned in the tattoo route, and as we did in our first study, not every message in the city is an organized, aesthetic effort. There were quite a few moments of puzzlement for our research team, as we tried to make sense of isolated words, dubious misspelling (as in, was this really a typo or was this deliberate misspelling for a purpose?), and other words. The next two images below provide two interesting examples:

Image 8. Graffiti in a neighborhood in Medellín.

Image 8. Graffiti in a park in Medellín.

As we tried to interpret both graffiti, we wondered if the former was trying to make a point by spelling "sense" without an e. In the case of the latter, the word "madafacka" actually seemed to us as if the artist were sounding out the word "mother****er".

Our Ongoing Revisiting of our City as Literacy

We have already developed two research studies (and already crafting a third) as an effort to question how our city, albeit not fully multilingual, is what

we call a polylanguaged city. English has stopped being a taboo issue in the city, with its emergence ever more ubiquitous each day. Regular people, as well as tattoo and graffiti artists, have found that English provides a series of affordances that complement Spanish, rather than eliminate it (especially considering how proud Medellín citizens are of their Spanish dialect). In the case of tattoo, the issue of language economy was a very powerful finding for our team, one that, in all fairness, we had not even conceived when we drafted our interview protocols. It was, however, a pleasant surprise, as it showed us that language choices are not just the product of fads, but conscious decisions that follow affective, social, and sometimes political reasons.

In the case of tattoo as a growing form of embodied literacy (Jones, 2013), language choice is very closely tied to identity. The fact that prayers and Psalms, for instance, are among the most common is not unusual in a country that has traditionally been very religious and where most people affiliate with the Catholic Church. Finding phrases related to family also reaffirm how people in Medellín use English to express their traditional values as members of these superdiverse societies we find in our cities today. In the case of graffiti, the moments of social awareness that are already emerging in English also show evidence of the new diasporas that are appearing in the city, which make the use of English as a social consciousness resource a very powerful weapon.

One important discovery of our study was the full extent of the ubiquitous nature of second languages in the city. In our first study, we had discovered that it was visible, but since we were only looking at edifices and very static locations (such as billboards), it was less evident. As we moved into more transient forms

of text, how English coexists with Spanish became a broader realization. People with words and phrases in English are from north to sound, and while there might be some differences in frequency based on city location, the potential differences related to gender or socio-economic status are narrowing every day. When it comes to tattoos, we can no longer say that tattoos in other languages are a luxury of the affluent. When it comes to graffiti, no neighborhood is free of messages in English, even the most affluent.

However, the larger question of how this translates to policy still looms in the horizon. Colombian language policies still keep looking at English as something that we need to import (as evidenced by the recent trend of hiring so-called "native speakers" as teacher's aides for public schools), as opposed to realizing that an inward look at the ubiquity of language may serve as an inspiration and a more powerful rationale to encourage students to be more invested in English and other second languages by extension. We are also beginning to think about our next steps and our potential interest in the growing communities of language practice that are appearing both institutionally and organically, including those fostered by the growing diasporas of immigrants from the U.S. and elsewhere. The questions ahead of us are very interesting and we will continue looking at our hometown as a place where literacy practices, especially in second languages, keep reinventing themselves every day.

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