

Connected Communities

Language as Talisman

Kate Pahl, Deborah Bullivant, Hugh Escott, Jane Hodson, David Hyatt, Marcus Hurcombe, Steve Pool and Richard Steadman-Jones



Background

Executive Summary

In this project, we used 'provocations' as a way to generate encounters between participants from different contexts: community members, school children, artists and writers, youth and literacy workers, teachers and academics.

The image of 'language as talisman' gestured towards aspects of language use without insisting on any particular way of understanding them. It opened up a space for participants to develop a collaborative exploration of (1) the role of language in mediating power and offering protection, (2) the place of tradition in shaping language use, (3) the relationship between narrative and language as a protective medium, (4) everyday experiences of 'crafting' language, and (5) the materialisation of language in different media. Reflecting upon one's own use of language can be a powerful source of resilience but we considered that this reflective process should not involve the imposition of academic knowledge on participants. Academics do have useful frameworks for examining these issues – relevant fields discussed in our literature review include New Literacy Studies, Accommodation Theory and Discourse Attuning, Multimodality, Ethnography, and Sociolinguistic approaches to variation – however, our work did not prioritise academic approaches, starting instead from the image of the talisman and so creating the possibility of less predictable encounters and a richer range of work. The review was therefore co-produced and outputs aimed both at academics and community partners.

Researchers and Project Partners

Researcher

Hugh Escott

Project Partners

High Greave Junior School

Rawmarsh Youth Service

Thorogate Junior School

Please see acknowledgements at the back for full list of project partners.

Key words

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Language as Talisman

Introduction

This scoping review explores contemporary understandings of language and literacy practices in communities. It is informed by the 'community study' which was conducted with two schools, High Greave Junior school and Thorogate Junior School, and in Victoria Rosehill Park, with Rawmarsh Youth Service – all in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, UK. We have also drawn on insights from the artists involved in the project, in particular Andrew McMillan, poet and Cassie Limb, creative artist. Our team took a heterogeneous approach to knowledge creation across university and community contexts.

The phrase 'language as talisman' emerged from a shared interest in the ways in which language can operate as a source of resilience. It was a way to raise questions about the uses and meanings of language and literacy that did not draw entirely on an academic discourse and would therefore provide a more open space for discussion across University and Community contexts. We wanted to explore ways in which young people could gain insights into their use of language and link this to the literature. The uses of dialect, gesture and everyday multimodal communication (Kress 2010) were particularly important in articulating young people's agency in language. Here, we consider the relationship between language and power as played out both within the literature and within community contexts.

Method

We saw the concept of 'Language as Talisman' as a provocation to help us construct a set of encounters with youth workers, families, young

people, elders and educators. The encounters were not just between the people and the disciplines but also between ideas and forms – poetry, film, visual art, ethnography, meta-language, language and literacy. We saw these encounters as 'learnings' which then iteratively informed both our practice and the review. Here, we work through the way in which these encounters structured the research field.

Review Strategy

We read the literature on talismans, magic and charms. We looked at a range of issues related to the idea of the talisman including power, protection, location in a tradition, narrative and materiality. We engaged in discussions with teachers and young people about what language means to them, their language practices, the different kinds of language they use and how others respond to their language. We then turned to the literature in order to provide understandings of how language use is framed and perceived in different contexts.

We decided to focus on texts that we considered to be foundational. This included fields of language study that seem appropriate to the comparison of language with talisman. The fields we surveyed included New Literacy Studies, spatial literacies, multimodal literacies, discourse analysis, ethnographic approaches to language study, ethnography, the anthropology of writing, linguistic ethnography, the ethnography of communication, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics including folk linguistics, language ideology, accommodation theory, language teaching, orthography, enregisterment, meta-language, community-situated literacy and the talisman in literature. While there is a clear intellectual genealogy between some of these fields and they are well

known to each other, in other instances they remain apart.

Intersections across the literature

Here, we outline the fields we have found to be helpful and we explain why they supported our understanding of literacy and language in the field.

The concept of literacy as a social practice comes from the work of the New Literacy Studies, which considers the way in which literacy is ideologically situated in local contexts drawing upon ethnographic methodologies (Street 1993). Literacy practices can be found embedded within households in different ways, for example, through everyday events and practices such as shopping lists, craft instructions or form filling, or through more literary and aesthetic practices such as oral storytelling, writing, drama, poetry. Hoggart's classic study on the Uses of Literacy (1957) showed how literacy practices such as everyday 'sayings' are culturally specific, and linked to everyday social practice. Literacy and language can be linked to domains of practice, for example 'home' literacies have been recognised as being different in some ways to 'schooled' literacy practices (Street and Street 1991; Barton and Hamilton 1998). In this review, we looked at the literacies of the young people in a youth setting, that included 'skate park literacies' (Moje et al 2004) as well as everyday literacies such as tattoos, badges and markings, together with linguistic practices such as oral storytelling and drama.

Language could, we argued, incorporate gesture, drawing, and other model-making practices. We found the work of Gunther Kress (2010) particularly helpful in understanding

how language becomes part of a multimodal complex in which other modes such as image, sound and gesture are also present. This understanding widened our recognition of what we were seeing. People draw on multiple repertoires of linguistic and multimodal practices including the use of different languages and dialect patterns to make meaning in specific contexts, which led us to looking at accommodation theory and the ways in which speakers create and project different social identities through their use of different linguistic variants (Coupland 2007). We moved across to the field of socio-linguistics to make sense of these practices. One encounter was between New Literacy Studies and socio-linguistics. Another was the field of multimodality with New Literacy Studies/socio-linguistics. For example, we asked children to record everyday words and sayings for 'precious words' which both articulated the children's understanding of their own linguistic practices, something that is described in the literature on meta-linguistic practices, but also is a feature of the New Literacy Studies' interest in everyday literacies and linguistic practices.

As we worked with young people in the park and in the schools, we recognised how they were using language both to represent particular identities but also to explore the relationship between their everyday lives and the stories they told. We drew on the work of Hymes (1996) from the ethnography of communication in understanding how life could be seen as a source of narrative. We also found linguistic ethnography, the approach of Ben Rampton (2006) and Janet Maybin (2007) helpful. This provided a situated account of how children and young people use language. The widening of language to include oral, gestural and performative forms of language was a

key argument in Finnegan's work (2007). We were able to draw on her work to understand how language was situated in material realms, for example, could be seen in gesture, film, oral storytelling and performance. The ethnographic work, for example, with a group of young people who met regularly in the local secondary school, involved exploring the power of oral language in the construction of an oral and then written story. The relationship between everyday life narratives and literacy practices could be explored in this way (Hymes 1996). We spent time with the young people and listened to how they conceptualised language and literacy. The study we conducted with the community was a form of collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005). We were able to identify differences across different schools of thought; and consider how differently situated conceptual frameworks, for example, ideas from Halliday about language as social semiotic (1978), could be used in relation to emerging theories of multimodality (Kress 1997). We could then apply these ideas to the movements in the park of the boys who used the skate park to create spatially informed purposeful but multi-semiotic movements.

Our work was informed by these intersections but also by experiencing language in the field for ourselves. Standard English, for example, was seen as mandatory by the two schools we worked with, although many of the children spoke a dialect that was echoed within the writing of the author Arthur Eaglestone, himself a miner from Rawmarsh writing in the 1920's and 1930s (Dataller 1925). The children employed their repertoire of knowledge of the local dialect in reading his work aloud. We drew on accommodation theory, especially recent work in this area concerning attenuation, and discourse attuning (Coupland 2010) to support the children and to make sense of

these choices and dilemmas, between dialect and Standard English (Coupland and Giles 1998). They enacted scenarios in which these choices could be linked to different contexts for speaking and listening. An encounter between the history of dialect as instantiated in literature and the contemporary dialects of Rawmarsh was therefore very fruitful as it showed how important it is to recognise the cultural history of dialect in areas where that dialect is being used today, giving a really strong argument to why dialect needs to be appreciated and studied in schools as part of a cultural recognition of language use across time and space.

Language is linked to power, and to discourses of power (Gee 1999, Fairclough 2001). We were able to use the image of the 'talisman' to open up this idea. This was particularly useful with the youth service, who described this approach as a way to engage young people in activity where their voices were heard. They made a film with young people using a drama company as a facilitator, about their interactions with parents and social workers.

We also realised the relationship between language and power in a material form. We explored the idea of language as material through making artwork with sand, a visual exploration of the ideas that spoken language being invisible creates our reality. This provided the roots of developing our connection to language and its personal and group ownership and heart-felt connections. We asked children in schools to make talismans that contained their favourite stories and sayings. Poetry, sayings, oral stories, drama, films and written and materialised texts all mattered to the people involved in the project. We placed the concept of language as power alongside material and craft based activities which brought to the fore how children and young

people made sense of language. The work generated the space for new dialogue and created a space for us to consider language use from a different perspective.

From these encounters we developed some outcomes that have been useful to the communities we worked with, including a book, 'Reunion' written by three girls in Rawmarsh, a film about why language is important for the schools as well as a website:

<http://languagetalisman.wordpress.com/>
which held together all of these outcomes.

Key themes

Our overarching theme was the value of the provocation as a way to lead into collaborative work, in this case the concept of Language as Talisman. The themes that we had explored in relation to language could be summarised as follows:

- Language is socially situated and realised in interaction (Halliday 1978)
- Language is realised within different modal forms (Kress 2010)
- Decisions about language can be understood and explored by those who use it (Jaworski et al. 2004)
- Inscriptions of language through spelling and orthography are socially constructed and vary according to social norms (Sebba 2007).
- Different understandings of what style of language is appropriate in what context continue to exist with sometimes problematic consequences (Coupland and Giles 1988)
- There are a number of different beliefs about language and these reside both

in the everyday and academic domains (Edwards 2010).

- Language use is a source of power and agency and needs to be recognised as powerful in institutional and community settings (Hymes 1996).
- Language is linked to performance and concepts such as style and register in helpful in making that link (Rampton 2006)

We also had some themes in relation to literacy:

- Literacy, like language is related to ideological contexts and is always realised through social practice (Street 1993)
- Literacy practices are materially and socially situated in different domains of practice including home, school, community (Barton and Hamilton 1998)
- Oral forms may sediment into written forms but can also be performed, or experienced in gesture (Finnegan 2007)
- Literacy is also multimodal as it is realised in print, on walls and in everyday contexts (Kress 1997)

Recommendations for future research

The study of language and literacy in everyday contexts needs to be useful to practitioners. The work of Snell (2013) has been helpful in showing us how children strategically draw on dialect in different contexts, in her study of children in the North East's use of language. Her critique of traditionalists who consider dialect and 'street' language to disadvantage children is based on her ethnographic study of how children make meaning in quite strategic and informed ways. We would like to see an

understanding of how children and young people could make sense of the repertoire of linguistic resources available to them, and then produce a language of description for this process. Children and young people's own recognition of language use could become a source of resilience in their everyday discourse. Children, young people and practitioners could become involved in the production of this language of description so that the academic world was not cut off from the realm of practice. Our project was an attempt to draw on the community contexts to create conceptual frameworks for the literature review. We think that a way forward would be to break down the barriers across different fields and consider how they would be useful in a practical way to support practitioners as well as children's linguistic awareness.

We would also highlight our methodology. We consider that provocations, such as the idea of language as talisman, are useful for collaborative work. The concept enabled very different conceptualisations of language to come to the fore. These ranged from actual talismans in jars which were decorated and filled with language to a meta-linguistic understanding by children of how they could employ their local dialect in different contexts. By calling the project 'language as talisman' we were able to take the everyday world of language and make it special. We could then provide something for young people, teachers, youth workers, poets, artists, academics and park users to cohere around. To provide a language of description for this methodology we employed the concept of a 'holding form' (Witkin 1974) which could be something that created a 'disturbance' in the ripple of the everyday for people to react to. The constellations of ideas that we created from the project went in many different ways but all

spoke about the uses of language and literacy in everyday contexts with a focus on the agentive power of language.

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References and external links

We draw here on a longer annotated literature review that lists the sources in more detail, available here:

<http://languageetalisman.wordpress.com>

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