Challenges in analysing transnational identities in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora

This paper discusses two approaches to analysing migrant identities, looking specifically at Sri Lankan Tamil (SLT) migrants’ transnational identities in London. The first approach uses an *Intercultural* theoretical framework proposed by Burgio (2016) while the second uses a *Language Socialization* (LS) framework (Baquedano-Lopez & Figueroa, 2012). I offer a critique of Burgio’s approach and argue that Language Socialization is better suited to this type of analysis.

Sri Lankan Tamils have had a long history of migration to the UK, but the largest wave of migration has taken place since the onset of the civil war in Sri Lanka in 1983. The community thus not only includes professional migrants who arrived before the civil war, but also many refugees who came straight from Sri Lanka as well as refugees who took routes through non-English speaking European countries before finally arriving in the UK.

Burgio highlights the short-comings of the traditionally conceived Intercultural theory because it cannot adequately describe diasporas such as the SLT diaspora that are “complex, multi-faceted and transnational” (pg 119). He attempts to renew the categories within Intercultural theory, revising the previous model that proposes a connection between only two poles, i.e. between *two national cultures*, each one representing a supposed homogeneous national identity. Burgio suggests instead a *three-pole connection*, which includes ‘the country of origin’, ‘the country of destination’ and ‘the diasporic community’. Here he recognises that diasporic communities such as the SLT community are not homogeneous; are “living-in-mobility” (i.e. constantly moving between borders); and have active dense networks.

This paper evaluates Burgio’s proposal of a ‘three-pole connection’. It suggests instead that the connection should be multi-polar, and recommends that a LS framework is better equipped to analyse the SLT diaspora’s transnational identities. Language socialization research studies “socially and culturally organized *interactions* that conjoin less and more experienced persons in the structuring of knowledge, emotion and social action” (Ochs, E., 2000: 230). It recognizes that *interactions* within super-diverse contexts such as London are often realized as *plurilingual language practices* (Blommaert & Rampton 2011) such as those that take place in the SLT diaspora, i.e. different varieties of Tamil; English spoken as standard British, educated Sri Lankan, vernacular London and as second language learner styles; languages like Danish, French, German and Swiss-German introduced by adults and children from mainland Europe. A LS approach has the tools to interpret pluringual practices and multi-directional influences that help shape transnational identities.

Drawing on the fieldwork undertaken in the Leverhulme funded project “Adult Language Socialization in the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in London”, the study involves c. 40 Sri Lankan Tamil diasporians. The preliminary findings show that the SLT diaspora, in different ways, are co-opted into becoming responsible for integrating members into their community. This is ideally studied within a LS framework which, unlike intercultural theory, can show how the commitment and co-participation of the “expert” and “novice” crucially influence the degree of integration, and hence, the development of their identities.
References


