Meaning-making as dialogic process: Official and carnival lives in the language classroom

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Abstract

This paper adopts a Bakhtinian analysis to understand the complexities of discourse in language learning classrooms. Drawing on empirical data from two of four linked case studies in a larger, ESRC-funded project we argue that students learning in complementary (also known as ‘community language’, ‘supplementary’, ‘heritage language’) schools create ‘second lives’ in the classroom. They do this through the use of carnivalesque language, introducing new voices into classroom discourse, using mockery and parody to subvert tradition and authority, and engaging in the language of ‘grotesque realism’. Students use varieties of parodic language to mock their teacher, to mock each other, to mock notional students as second language learners, and to mock their school’s attempts to transmit reified versions of ‘cultural heritage’. These creative discourse strategies enable the students to create carnival lives in the classroom which provide alternatives to the official worlds of their teachers. In doing so the students are able to move in and out of official and carnival worlds, making meaning in discourse which is dialogic, as they represent themselves and others in voices which cut across boundaries in complex, creative, sophisticated ways.

Key words

Language Dialogism Carnival Parody Multilingualism Creativity

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Introduction

In this paper we present an analysis of some of the voices we heard as we conducted linguistic ethnographic research¹ in eight complementary (also known as ‘community language’, ‘supplementary’, ‘heritage language’) schools in four British cities. They are the voices of students attending schools which set out to teach students Cantonese and Turkish, and the voices of their teachers. These are voices which make meaning in creative, complex ways, voices suffused with, and shaped by, the voices of others. They are voices of struggle, voices of authority, voices of negotiation, voices which bear the traces of histories and futures, voices in process. They are multilingual voices, moving freely between ‘languages’, calling into play sets of linguistic resources at their disposal (Heller 2007). They are voices of ideological becoming, frequently ‘double-voiced’, expressing simultaneously more than one intention (Bakhtin 1981:324). In our analysis we noticed that children and adults alike frequently made meaning through representing other voices within their own voices. In this paper we adopt a lens which draws on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Volosinov², enabling us to understand the myriad, complex ways in which meanings are made in the language classroom, as students and teachers (inter alia) evaluate, incorporate, appropriate, anticipate, repudiate, and exaggerate the reported and purported voices of others. In her linguistic ethnographic
study of children’s voices in and out of schools, Maybin (2006:24) found that “meaning-making emerges as an ongoing dialogic process at a number of different interrelated levels: dialogues within utterances and between utterances, dialogues between voices cutting across utterance boundaries and dialogues with other voices from the past”. In this paper we engage with meaning-making as dialogic process and ideological becoming as social actors in complementary schools represented themselves and others in voices which cut across boundaries in complex, creative, sophisticated ways.

**Dialogic discourse**

Bailey (2007:269) argues that in researching the ways in which linguistic practices contribute to social identity negotiations among multilingual speakers, a Bakhtinian perspective “explicitly bridges the linguistic and the sociohistorical, enriching analysis of human interaction” as it is “fundamentally about intertextuality, the ways that talk in the here-and-now draws meanings from past instances of talk”. Tsitsipis (2005:2) finds Bakhtin’s thought “useful for the unraveling of the discursive continuities in chunks of narrative or conversational segments as well as for the study of broader structures related to the political economy of language”. Rampton (2006:364) adopts Bakhtin’s analysis to understand the linguistic practices of students in an inner-city high school, and especially the “spontaneous moments when these youngsters were artfully reflexive about the dichotomous values that they tacitly reproduced in the variability of their routine speech, moments when they crystallized the high-low structuring principles that were influential
but normally much more obscure in their everyday variability”. Maybin (2006:4) situates her analysis of the verbal strategies of school children firmly in Bakhtin’s framework to account for social practices which “both reflect and help to produce the macro-level complexes of language, knowledge and power (sometimes referred to as discourses), which organize how people think and act”. Lemke (2002:72) invokes Bakhtin to argue that language in use is dialogical, as “it always constructs an orientational stance toward real or potential interlocutors, and toward the content of what is said”. Lin and Luk (2005:86) engaged with Bakhtin’s notion of ‘carnival laughter’ to understand the creative linguistic practices of English language learners in Hong Kong schools. They demonstrated that students were able to resist the routines of regular classroom practice by populating prescribed utterances with playful, ironic accents.

Why, then, are contemporary linguists, seeking to understand aspects of the ways in which young people speak in late modernity, going to the writings of a literary scholar born in nineteenth century Russia, whose main academic interests were in the novels of Dostoevsky and Rabelais? Linguists have increasingly turned to the works of Bakhtin and his collaborator Volosinov because their theories of language enable connections to be made between the voices of social actors in their everyday, here-and-now lives, and the political, historical, and ideological contexts which they inhabit. In familiar terms, Bakhtin’s philosophy of language contributes to the means by which we may go beyond a simple dichotomy of ‘micro/macro’, or ‘structure and agency’, to understand the structural in the agentic and the agentic in the structural; the ideological in the interactional and the interactional in the ideological; the ‘micro’ in the ‘macro’ and the
‘macro’ in the ‘micro’. A key feature of Bakhtinian thought in making such a contribution is the notion of language as ‘dialogic’.

Related to the notions of intertextuality, interdiscursivity and recontextualisation, Bakhtin’s thought suggests that voices relate to other voices by representing within their own utterance the voices of others (Blackledge 2005; Luk 2008). In doing so a voice may be hostile to other voices, or may be in complete harmony with them, or may suppress them, leaving only a suggestion that they are in any way present. Luk (2008:129) suggests that according to Bakhtin “our speech, that is all our utterances, come to us already filled with the words of others”. Discourse bears the traces of the voices of others, is shaped by them, responds to them, contradicts them or confirms them, in one way or another evaluates them (Bakhtin 1981:272). Within a single utterance different voices clash or coincide, ‘make digs’ at each other or concede to each other, and this may be as much the case where one of the voices is apparently quite absent as when both are present. Discourse, then, is dialogic, shaped and influenced by the discourse of others. Van Lier (2002:158) points out that language is always dialogical, reflecting other voices, as “it is shaped by the context and at the same time shapes the context”. Bakhtin argued that language is “historically real, a process of heteroglot development, a process teeming with future and former languages…which are all more or less successful, depending on their degree of social scope and on the ideological area in which they are employed” (Bakhtin 1981:357). Maybin and Swann (2007:504) propose that Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, “the co-existence and struggle between diverse social languages and between centripetal and centrifugal forces”, can be used to explore the “dialogic
positioning of social languages within texts, and their animation and double-voicing”.

Rampton (2006:27) noticed in the speech of students in British secondary schools that young people at times break into “artful performance”, when the act of speaking itself is put on display for the scrutiny of an audience. Rampton refers to a particular kind of spoken performance, “stylisation”, in which “accent shifts represent moments of critical reflection on aspects of educational domination and constraint that become interactionally salient on a particular occasion”. That is, in producing an artistic image of another’s language (in Rampton’s study ‘posh’ or ‘Cockney’ accents), speakers position themselves interactionally in relation to certain ideologies. Dialogical relationships are possible not only between entire utterances; the dialogical approach can be applied to any meaningful part of an utterance, even to an individual word, when “we hear in that word another person’s voice” (Bakhtin 1973:152). Bakhtin argued that the importance of struggling with another’s discourse, and its influence in the “individual’s coming to consciousness” (1981:348), is enormous.

**Carnivalesque**

In his seminal work *Rabelais and His World* (1968), Bakhtin analysed three arenas of significance in what he called the language of carnival (Bakhtin 1994:196): (i) festivities, (ii) parody, and (iii) the language of the market-place. The linguistic practices of the multilingual young people in our study lead us to give closer consideration to these aspects of Bakhtin’s work. For Bakhtin carnivalesque language is full of “the laughter of
all the people” (1994:200), and includes ritual spectacles, festive pageants, comic shows, parodies, curses and oaths. In the medieval Europe of Rabelais, carnival festivities were characterised by comic parodies of serious official, feudal, and ecclesiastical ceremonies. Carnival was “a counter-hegemonic tradition” (Caldas-Couthard 2003:290), which, in Bakhtin’s words, “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and completed” (Bakhtin 1986:10). The notions of change and renewal, and of ‘becoming’, are crucial in Bakhtin’s understanding of the carnivalesque. In their study of young second-language learners, Iddings and McCafferty (2007:33) point out that “Although Bakhtin clearly viewed carnival as an act of rebellion, the mood of rebellion in carnival is not primarily one of anger for him, but most saliently one of satire, critique, and ultimately, play.” The laughter of carnival is ambivalent, at one and the same time triumphant and mocking, asserting and denying, burying and reviving.

Parody was a widespread feature of carnival festivities in the Middle Ages. Sacred parodies of religious thought, parodies of debates and dialogues, were common elements in the temporary liberation of the people, as they appropriated and subverted generic ritual by presenting droll aspects of the feudal system and of feudal heroics. In parody the first voice introduces a second voice which has a semantic intention that is directly opposed to the first, and “The second voice, once having made its home in the other’s discourse, clashes hostilely with its primordial host and forces him to serve directly
opposing aims, as discourse becomes an arena of battle between two voices” (Bakhtin 1994:106). Bakhtin argues that parodic discourse can be extremely diverse, and is analogous to discourse which is ironic, or which makes any other double-voiced use of someone else’s words. Pennycook (2007:587) suggests that mimicry of the dominant powers and discourses unsettles those powers, as “parodic strategies are also acts of sameness that create difference: they differ from the original and simultaneously change the original through recontextualization”. In her investigation of the language socialization experiences of a Punjabi-speaking English language learner in Canada, Day (2002:85) summarised Bakhtin’s notion that “no two apparently identical utterances made by different individuals can ever be truly alike, because dialogic relations are always present when we talk”. Bakhtin demonstrated that carnivalesque parody was often tolerated by the powerful, as it was no more than a temporary representation of the usurping of traditional and conventional hierarchies. Parody is far from meaningless though. In standing on their heads the usual relations of power in society the people claimed their freedom, however ephemeral, and in that moment challenged the established order. Bakhtin makes a distinction between mocking laughter which is “bare negation” (1994:200), which he associates with the modern, cynical world, and the ambivalent laughter of the people, which includes the mocker in the mocking, as “he who is laughing also belongs to it” (1994:201). Laughter is all-inclusive, and is the language of “the people’s unofficial truth” (1994:209).

A third aspect of carnival is grotesque realism. Bakhtin pointed out that the language of carnival was the language of degradation: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is
degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (1986:19). The language of the bowels and the genitals, the language of curses and oaths, meant the defeat of authority by the people, as “This laughing truth, expressed in curses and abusive words, degraded power” (Bakhtin 1994:210). Ribald references to the phallus played a leading role in the grotesque image, in the language of the market-place, which remained outside official spheres but was an ambivalent language, directed at everyone. There were myriad expressions of abuse and mockery filled with bodily images, as “men’s speech is flooded with genitals, bellies, defecations, urine, disease, noses, mouths, and dismembered parts” (Bakhtin 1994:235). This was a language which in its debasement debased power, and was at the centre of all that was unofficial. At once positive and negative, speaking both of decay and renewal, “the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven” (1994:234), as each image creates a “contradictory world of becoming” (Bakhtin 1968:149). Bakhtin differentiated between ‘authoritative’ discourse (e.g. of the father or teacher), and ‘internally persuasive’ discourse, where the latter is populated with the voices, styles, and intentions of others. An individual’s “ideological becoming” (1981:342) is characterized by the gap between the authoritative voice, and the internally persuasive word. Rampton (2006:28) revealed adolescents using ‘posh’ and ‘Cockney’ varieties “to embellish performances of the grotesque and to portray images of unsettling, disorderly sexuality”. These stylisations were located in the adolescents’ broader trajectories of ‘ideological becoming’, “relating both to the kinds of educated people that these youngsters were becoming and to historical movements in education” (Rampton 2006:365). The three aspects of the carnivalesque, carnival
festivities, parody, and the language of the market-place, will inform our understanding of the linguistic practices of the multilingual young people in our study, and of their complementary school teachers.

Methodology and project design

The research reported in this paper is a comparative sociolinguistic study of four interlocking case studies with two researchers working in two complementary (‘heritage language’, ‘community language’, ‘supplementary’) schools in each community. These are non-statutory schools, run by their local communities, which students attend in order to learn the language normally associated with their ethnic heritage. The case studies focused on Gujarati schools in Leicester, Turkish schools in London, Cantonese and Mandarin schools in Manchester, and Bengali schools in Birmingham. The project design is of four linking ethnographically informed case studies with data collected simultaneously and shared by the full team over a 10 week data collection period. Each case study identified two complementary schools in which to observe, record, and interview participants. We also collected key documentary evidence, and took photographs. After four weeks two key participant children were identified in each school. These children were audio-recorded during the classes observed, and where possible also for 30 minutes before and after each class over a six week period. Key stakeholders in the schools were interviewed, including teachers and administrators, and
the key participant children and their parents. In all we collected 192 hours of audio-recorded interactional data, wrote 168 sets of field notes, made 16 hours of video-recordings, and interviewed 66 key stakeholders.

The specific aims of the project were:

1. To explore the social, cultural and linguistic significance of heritage language schools both within their communities and in the wider society.
2. To investigate the range of linguistic practices used in different contexts in the heritage language schools.
3. To investigate how the linguistic practices of students and teachers in heritage language schools are used to negotiate young people’s multilingual and multicultural identities.

We have reported the findings of each separate case study elsewhere (Creese et al 2007a, b, c, d). In this paper we focus on just two key classroom episodes which reveal something of the ways in which the participants’ linguistic practices constituted and were constituted by their social, political and historical contexts, and extended our understanding of the young people’s linguistic (and other semiotic) meaning-making as aspects of their ideological becoming. They are (1) a dictation class in the Cantonese school in Manchester, and (2) a classroom activity in one of the Turkish schools in London. Limitations of space inhibit us from extending our analysis to examples from the other schools.
**Episode 1**

The first episode was audio-recorded in the Cantonese school. The teacher is engaging the children in a dictation test, which was a typical activity in this and other schools where we conducted our observations. We hear the voices of four students (S1, S2, S3 and S4), and the teacher (T). S2 was wearing a digital audio voice recorder with a collar microphone. The students were all born in Manchester in the north of England, and usually spoke with strong Mancunian accents. The teacher was born in China, and had lived in UK for 5 years.

**Excerpt 1a**

1. **S1:** chapter fourteen
2. **S2:** <lesson fourteen> <what are you laughing at> … shut up.
3. **T:** <dictate up to>'<the Apollo spaceship>' [starts to read the dictation]
4. **S1:** wait, wait, wait … [stylized, high-pitched]
5. **T:** OK. <I'll say it again> “<July the sixteenth> comma
6. **T:** <they>[<took the Apollo spaceship and> <left the earth>]
7. **T:** <left the earth>"
S3: uh-huh, uh-huh..uh-huh [stylized, after every word T reads]
T: <the spaceship> <the Apollo spaceship> <left the earth> 
S2: the one million pound question [stylized]
T: <full stop>
S2: the one million pound question when you’ve got to copy this [stylized]
T: ‘<spaceship flew very quickly>’
S2: do you mind not swearing I’ve actually not stopped the tape
T: ‘<the spaceship flew very quickly>’
S1: I can’t keep up the pace
S4: <what>
T [reading]: <the spaceship flew very quickly>
S2: <what> I can’t keep up of the pace <‘ya’ sentence ending> <you don’t know how to speak English> me not speak
S1: me not speak Chinese [highly stylized mock-ethnic accent] what?
S3: you’re too fast [assertively]
T: OK.
S4: slo - ow … do- w - n [exaggerated and slow]
T: <I’ll say it slowly> <the last time> <the very last time>
S4: thank you
S1: I am lost
In this excerpt we are interested in the ways in which the voices of the students engage and clash with other voices. We are also interested in the ways in which the students adopt a highly stylized language to represent this engagement with the voices of others, and to position themselves in particular ways. The students are finding it difficult to keep up with the teacher’s Cantonese dictation. In line 5 we see S1 ask the teacher to slow down (‘wait, wait, wait’). This apparently unidirectional request becomes double-voiced, however, as the student adopts a high-pitched, stylized intonation which mimics and mocks that of the teacher. The voice of the student clashes with the voice of the teacher and is ambivalent. Meaning is two-fold, as the student both requests that the dictation activity be slowed down to a manageable pace, and also undermines the activity itself by mocking the intonation of the teacher. In line 9 student 3 similarly introduces a dialogic element to what at first sight appears to be simple back-channeling, apparently affirming the teacher’s discourse. This is more than that however, as S3 develops a rhythmic, exaggerated intonation which subverts the teacher’s discourse at the same time as affirming it. The discourse of S3 is double-voiced, both mocking and supporting the teaching and learning activity.

In lines 12 and 14 we see a phenomenon which was quite common in our data, and one on which Maybin (2006) commented in her study. Here S2 adopts a stylized accent, perhaps that of a television game-show presenter, to say “the one million pound question”. He then connects the voice of the TV presenter to the classroom activity, saying, in the same media-type voice, “the one million pound question when you’ve got to copy this”. Here the student introduces a (real or imagined) voice from popular culture,
and allows that voice to coexist alongside the formal discourse of the dictation activity, in a quietly subversive double-voicing. In line 18 S1 says “I can’t keep up the pace”, complaining again that the dictation is too fast for him. S2 immediately picks up on this, parodying S1’s complaint by repeating it in a slightly stylized accent. In this repetition S1’s voice clashes with the voice of S2. Maybin (2006) argues that such repetition is almost always evaluative. Volosinov points out that “every utterance is above all an evaluative orientation” (1986:105). Pennycook (2007) and Day (2002) demonstrate that repetition of discourse is often an act of sameness which creates difference, making new meanings in new contexts from apparently identical language. The repetition of “I can’t keep up the pace” has a new and different sense when repeated in a slightly stylized voice.

S2 then adopts a highly stylized, ‘ethnic’ type accent to say ‘Me not speak English’. This appears to be prompted by S1’s complaint that he can not keep up with the dictation activity. First he says “<you don’t know how to speak English>”, possibly aiming his accusation at the teacher, who is conducting the dictation in Cantonese. Deliberately appropriating the stereotypically incorrect syntax of the English language learner (“me not speak English”), S2 now seems to adopt the parodic voice of a student who has not yet developed English proficiency. In the world of schooling which these young people inhabit, this may be the caricatured voice of the ‘English as an Additional Language’ (‘EAL’) or ‘English as a Second Language’ (‘ESL’) student. Talmy (2004) demonstrated that hierarchies of English language learners exist in classrooms, as the EAL/ESL category is culturally produced and reproduced. Talmy refers to the discursive
construction of the newly-arrived, “fresh-off-the-boat” student, relationally defined against an unmarked, idealized ‘native’ speaker (see also Creese et.al. 2006 for discussion of ‘freshie’ subject positioning in complementary schools in UK). Talmy refers to the “linguicism” at work in the social practice of “the public teasing and humbling of lower L2 English proficient students by their more proficient classmates”, which “was one of the primary ways that students produced and reproduced the linguicist hierarchy” (2004:164). In the data from the Cantonese classroom the subjects of the teasing and humbling are not present, but the discourse is just as much targeted at the exotic ‘other’. This double-voiced discourse appears to negatively evaluate learners of English, while allowing S2 to positively position himself as a more sophisticated speaker of English. S1 responds with an even more highly stylized ‘mock-ethnic’ accent: ‘me not speak Chinese’. Here S1 picks up on S2’s mock-EAL/ESL joke and recontextualises it, substituting ‘English’ with ‘Chinese’, maintaining his position as one whose ‘Chinese’ is not sufficient for the demands of the dictation exercise. The comic ‘ethnic’ accent in which this is spoken pokes fun at the learner of Chinese, while at the same time acknowledging that he too is a learner of Chinese. He inhabits this position at the same time as distancing himself from it, in discourse which is intensely dialogic. The meaning of S1’s statement would have been very different if he had said, in his usual Mancunian accent, ‘I don’t speak Chinese’. Instead, the discourse of the two students invokes stereotypes of language learners which only become stereotypes because they are frequently reiterated. They may position themselves as language learners, but in Talmy’s terms they do not position themselves on the same plane as lower English proficient students in the ‘hierarchy of linguicism’. Complex ideological worlds clash and do battle
in these short utterances. Assumptions about language learners, and perhaps these learners’ feelings about language learning, become evident. At the same time positive and negative, the students’ discourse is double-voiced.

The second excerpt is from the same class, and the same session. It followed one minute after the previous excerpt. The voices are of the same social actors as in Excerpt 1a. S2 continues to wear a collar microphone.

**Excerpt 1b**

1. S3: [loud mock-snoring sound]
2. T: *<there was sunshine everywhere on the moon>*
4. T: *<there was sunshine everywhere on the moon>*
5. S1: uh-huh uh-huh [after each of the teacher’s words]
6. S2: two Rooneys what do you feel what does it feel like not to be in the World Cup?
7. S1: very terrible
8. S2: and you, Rooney?
9. S3: it’s fine, I can play in the second game.
10. S1: oh really?
11. S2: OK.
12. S3: I think I played a tremendous part, er, a terrible part in the play but I could go down straight the wing and pass it to Michael Owen and know he’ll score but
that’s the way it goes (. ) my name is Peter Crouch, commentating for the BBC cause I can do the robot [stylized]

S1: OK.

T: <after that> comma <there were stones and soil everywhere> [reading dictation]

S2: Eric, Rooney’s lost.

T: <If you don’t understand ‘sunshine’ . . .> <after that, just write> comma.

S2: verily talking gibberish

S1: somebody hold it

S2: oh Rooney the police are after you

S1: [singing in animated, high-pitched voice] case by case

S3: hey Homer, thanks for the Duff beer [highly stylized American accent]

S2: he threw the book over the mike […] Abdul Abdul Abdul Abdul Omar Abdul

S1: what…?

S2: gibberish. Omar

S1: what…?

S2: gibberish…Sherman’s new name is (. ) Mohammad. Abdul Abdul

S1: what? what?

S2: you are Mohammad

T: [continues to repeat dictation]

The loud snoring sound of S3 articulates comic resistance to the continuing dictation activity. S1 mimics the teacher’s voice in saying, loudly, ‘what?’, in a similar way to his parodic voice in line 5 of Excerpt 1a. Here, though, he seems to respond to an (unheard) admonishment from the teacher, and apologises. He retreats to the more quietly subversive strategy of repetitive back-channeling, as in line 9 of the previous section. Now S2 introduces a further voice from the world of popular culture, this time that of a television football commentator. The recordings were made during the football (soccer) World Cup in 2006. S2 initiates a role play with his friends S1 and S3. Wayne Rooney, Michael Owen and Peter Crouch all are England footballers. Peter Crouch was well known at the time for celebrating scoring a goal by doing a dance in the style of a robot. All three students here attempt to create a role-play in the voices of their football heroes. This is a comic interlude, as the students adopt a genre which is conventionalized and by now traditional. The presentation of football matches on television in Europe is routinely accompanied by post-match interviews with players, and studio interviews with pundits who are usually former or current players. The students are relatively respectful of the genre, but usurp it for comic effect (neither ‘two Rooneys’, nor ‘cause I can do the robot’ fit the genre in a straightforward way). The role-play is subversive, as the group introduces comic discourse which is at odds with the ‘official’ ongoing dictation activity. The appropriation of voices from outside contributes to the students usurping the teacher’s intentions. Pennington (1999:63) refers to the “commentary frame” of classroom discourse as the frame “least tied to the lesson ands most related to the world outside”. This is a vernacular framing of talk in the classroom, which can enable students to divert a lesson to their own purposes, and to create an “alternative discourse”.

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In line 20 S2 refers back to the end of Excerpt 1a, where S1 said ‘I am lost’ (line 31), but now refers to him as ‘Rooney’, continuing the football theme. The teacher pursues the dictation, and S2 comments that he is ‘talking gibberish’. This is not necessarily a comment on the Cantonese language per se, but certainly on the continuing ‘official’ classroom activity. Further voices are now introduced, once more from the students’ familiar worlds of popular media. S2 says ‘oh Rooney the police are after you’, mixing genres for comic effect, and S1 responds by singing in a high-pitched voice what seems to be a theme tune from a television programme. Next, student 3 introduces a voice from the popular television cartoon series, ‘The Simpsons’. This is the voice of Barney Gumble, authentically contrived here for no apparent purpose other than to contribute to the comic creation of the students’ ‘second world’ in resistance to the teacher’s dictation. Now (line 28) S2 begins allocating new names to the other students. No longer ‘Rooney’, they are ‘Abdul’, ‘Omar’, and ‘Mohammed’. S2 seems to position the other students as being associated with heritages in which they would traditionally have Islamic names. Their demographic context suggests that in the students’ experience these would very likely be fellow students of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or perhaps Somali heritage. S2 may be making a link here between Islamic names and his and S1’s ‘mock-ESL’ positioning of themselves and others. Although S1 now adopts the same stylized response (‘what’ ‘what’) to S2 to as he had to the teacher, S2 holds sway, insisting on calling each student by Islamic names. It is not clear whether the repetition of ‘gibberish’ (lines 31, 33) refers to the putative speech of the new characters ‘Abdul’, ‘Omar’ and ‘Mohammed’, or is a dismissal of S1’s parodic response. The teacher, meanwhile, continues to dictate to
students who are doing anything other than write down what he is saying. In this episode from the Cantonese classroom we have seen students appropriating a range of voices from popular media culture, and introducing them into the classroom in highly stylized versions. The students here introduce “surreptitious layers of talk of their own initiation” (Luk 2008:127) to counteract the alienating effects of the teacher’s authoritative discourse. We have also seen students mocking themselves and others, parodying the voices of language learners in unofficial, carnivalesque language, and allocating new names to each other which seem to chime with these ‘mock-ESL’ subject positions.

**Episode 2**

The second episode was recorded in one of the Turkish schools in London. In this episode the teacher is teaching language in the context of a traditional Mother’s Day celebration. The participants are the teacher (T), a student (S1) who wears a digital audio-recorder, and other students (Ss). Here too the episode begins with a dictation activity. S1 is engaged in conversation with other students, inaudible to the teacher.

**Excerpt 2a**

1. T: baslik yazin annenize baslik.. evet yaziyoruz.. <Write the title.. for your mother..
2. yes, we are writing>yaziyorum.. annenize <We are writing.. to your mother> Bu
3. sarkiyi ben söylícem siz yaziyorsunuz… <I will tell you the lyrics you’ll write it>
4. [some of the boys are playing with their mobile phones]
S1: yea you dickhead (..) suck my balls man suck my balls suck it no I’m not accepting it suck my balls…

T: cocuklar yazdiginizi okuyorum. <kids, I am reading the lyrics that you were trying to write> yani anlayacaginiz o kadar zahmet cekiyor ki , kimsenin gulecegi yok. Bunu yazdiniz mi? <that is to say that she is toiling away to such an extent that nobody feels like smiling. Have you written this?>

Ss: yazdik <yes, we have>

T: ikinci kitaya geciyoruz. <now we are going to the second verse> [plays music on cd system. some students are talking]

S1: I bet it’s a man who’s high (..) yani gelin cicek toplayalim [sings, exaggeratedly imitating the high-pitched voice of the singer] ey he’s taken helium he’s taken helium the person singing is a man who’s taken helium man

T: dinliyoruz <we are listening> [stops the music] Yazmaya devam edecegiz. <We will continue writing>

S1: shut the (. ) s-t-f-u (..) you know what s-t-f-u means?

T: [reading the lyrics of a song] yollarina serelim. Yani gelin cicek toplayalim..<let’s cover her way with flowers. So let’s collect some flowers> kimin yollarina seriyorlar? <whose way are they covering with flowers?>

Ss: annelerinin <their mother>

T: annelerinin <their mother>

S1: exactly it means shut the fuck up

T: cok onemli anneler gununde.. <it is very important especially on Mother’s Day>

S1: I am not accepting man
T: sevgi dolu turkulerle. *and with songs full of love* Melis yazıyor musun?

annesini sevenler yazıyor. sevgi dolu turkulerle. annemize verelim. *are you writing Melis? If you love your mother you will write this. And give the flowers to your mother*

S1: I don’t like my mum (..) I love her

T: seni annene şikayet edecegim. *I will complain to your mother about you*

S1: eh fat boy eh the one who sucks your dad’s dick eh the one that sucks dick the one that’s not gay I want the one that’s not gay
The teacher begins a dictation exercise not unlike the one we saw in the Cantonese classroom, but here the focus is the festive occasion of Mother’s Day, and he dictates the lyrics of a traditional Turkish song. As he speaks some of the students continue to use their mobile phones to send songs to each other. In lines 5-6 S1 uses abusive language to insist on his negotiating position in relation to swopping music files with another student. He is “not accepting” the file the other student wants to send, and argues this emphatically in what Bakhtin called the language of the market-place, three times repeating “suck my balls”. The teacher appears to be unaware of this interaction, or else judiciously ignores it. He continues with the dictation, and at line 12 plays a traditional Turkish song to the class on an audio system. The ‘official’ activity of the classroom continues, with the complicity of most of the students (e.g. lines 11, 23). S1 immediately takes up the opportunity to ridicule the song, joining in with the singer in a mocking, high-pitched voice. He argues that the voice of the female singer is probably that of a man “who’s taken helium”, further ridiculing the song. However, this is double-voiced discourse, as in order to exaggerate and mock at the voice of the singer he also participates, and becomes at least minimally involved in the celebration of Mother’s Day. As in Rampton’s (2006:315) study, the student on the one hand does what he is supposed to do, while on the other hand simultaneously making space for activities more to his liking. The teacher stops the music and tells the class that they will continue writing. S1, denied his opportunity for subversion, again invokes the language of curses and oaths. His discourse appears to be quite literally that of the ‘market-place’, the language in which to negotiate over the swopping of sound files. S1’s language creates a second, unofficial world, a discursive space in which to do business quite unrelated to the official
activity of the classroom. At the same time, he is able to move between the two floors, at
one moment negotiating with oaths and curses which distinguish the discourse of the
market-place, and are only for the ears of other students, and in the next re-joining the
more public discussion of the Mother’s Day celebration. Even here (line 32) S1’s
discourse is double-voiced, as he initially appears to adopt a subject position which
disallows any such celebration (“I don’t like my mum”), and seems to create a world
which is contrary not only to the classroom activity but also to the expectations of the
teacher. After a pause which is all comic timing, however, he turns the apparently
shocking initial statement into a joke in which he declares his love for his mother, thus
enabling him to continue to participate in the class activity, albeit in the role of the clown.
His declaration is ambivalent, mocking the notion of making such a declaration while still
making it. The official, authorised statement, ‘I love my mother’, appears to be
“reaccented” (Luk 2008:127), undermined, overturned, and yet confirmed. Ironically in
the context of the planned activity, the teacher now uses S1’s mother as a threat (line 33).
S1, having made his brief incursion into the official, public world of the classroom, now
returns to his semi-private space of oaths, curses and degradation, again invoking ribald
reference to the genitals and sexual activity (lines 34-35). This is discourse at the centre
of all that is unofficial. It is discourse which, in its grotesque imagery, creates a second
life, one which opposes power without opposing it, which undermines the official activity
without undermining it. This is the language of the market-place, in its debasement
debasing power, if only ephemerally.

Excerpt 2b
The next excerpt is from the same class, recorded two minutes later. Now other students, S2 and S3, are introduced. The teacher switches on the music again.

1 T: [switches music on again] dinliyorsunuz. Sizde soyleyen dans yapabilirsiniz <you are listening.. you can sing along too, you can dance>
2 S1: hadi <let’s do it>
3 S2: hey dance Turkish style.. Turkish style… ‘dugun’ [laughs] <wedding ceremony>
4 S1: hadi halay cekelim.. halay cekelim <let’s do folk dancing.. let’s do folk dancing>
5 do you know how to halay cek..? hadi halay cekelim < do you know how to do folk dancing? let’s do folk dancing.> Whoever is doing it with me? Halay
6 cekelim.. <let’s do folk dancing> hey just come, just come, just come man.. fuck you.. it’s gonna be joke. hey, hey [dancing] I know how to do it.. aahh my penis!
7 S3: [laughs uncontrollably]
8 T: [switches music off. wants students in two groups so that they can sing together. switches music on again]
9 S1: wait .. shush I’m gonna sing…[coughs to clear his throat] evet
10 T: soyluyoruz. <we are singing>
11 S1: hoy Ismet, let’s sing.. kimsenin gulecegi yok kimsenin gulecegi yok [singing along to music] la la la la la la la [exaggerated, loud] yeah.. give me that ball
12 please.. please..
13 [T is singing, some students are singing and clapping]
T: Gokhan disarı.. <Gokhan get out> sen disarı.. <you get out> Hakan disarı..

<Hakan get out> başkanın yanına gidiyorsunuz.. annelerinize soleyin beni
gorsun. < you are to see the principal.. tell your mother to see me>
S1 again seizes an opportunity to subvert the activity, bursting with enthusiasm (line 3) when the teacher suggests that the students can dance to the traditional music. The second student picks up on S1’s intonation, and suggests that they should dance “Turkish style” as would be typical at a Turkish wedding. The Turkish word ‘halay’ refers to a folk dance performed in a circle. Here S2 invokes the wedding, appropriating one traditional ritual (the wedding) in order to mock and subvert another (celebration of Mother’s Day). S1 continues in English and Turkish, inviting all to “just come”. At this point S1 is shouting loudly, while S3 is laughing uncontrollably. It is difficult to gain a full sense of the action from audio-recordings, but the researchers’ field notes for this session read as follows: “The music plays and the boys rap dance, make odd faces and produce funny noises. S2 is now setting the tone in the group of boys. They are imitating folk dance movements”. The students here both introduce elements of popular culture (‘rap dance’), and parody traditional folk dance. By both means hostility to the official, traditional, authorized activity is constituted. It is an act of sameness and difference, based in the traditional, to traditional music, but at the same time creating something new, making change by recontextualisation. This is not mere repetition but appropriation, the subversion of ritual by presentation of a new version of the traditional which creates a momentary suspension of conventional hierarchies. The introduction of ‘rap dance’ is comic not least because it is anachronistic, an element of the ‘folk-culture’ of the people which impinges on the authorised heritage of school activity. The mockery of the traditional dance (odd faces and funny noises) becomes a comic parody of the official discourse. Notwithstanding this, there is again a sense in which the creation of the parody partakes of the activity which the teacher is seeking to create. This is very different from non-participation. It is
participation, but on the terms of the students rather than the teacher. They use the
tradition, the heritage, to create their own order, to challenge the existing hierarchy, and
to claim their freedom, however ephemeral. They populate traditional discourse with their
own local social languages and voices for their own purposes (Lin and Luk 2005:89). In
mocking the dance they mock the tradition, but at the same time mock themselves. This is
ambivalent laughter, at once positive and negative, creating a “contradictory world of
becoming” (Bakhtin 1968:149). It is as if the students will only participate in the
‘heritage’ they are offered if they can put their own stamp on it, taking it as their own,
and usurping it. S1 dances, but ends the dance with a cry of “aah my penis!” as reference
to the genitals becomes once again the centre of the unofficial world. S1’s cry subverts
the formality of the dance, but at the same time he mocks himself and, perhaps, all males.
This is an inclusive joke, a laugh at the expense of the people but also with the people. At
this point the teacher attempts to organise the students to sing the Mother’s Day song.
Again taking his cue for subversive action, S1 is quick to take the floor (line13). He
clears his throat with a cough which exudes seriousness and respect. Here ‘evet’ is
stylised, adopting the voice of a professional singer, as he prepares to sing. At first he
calls on the help of another student (Ismet) to help him with the song, just as he had
called on others to help him with the dance. Ismet does not join in, but S1 goes ahead, at
first singing the song rather hesitantly, but apparently respectfully. After a few moments
he changes tone, singing “la la la la la la la” (line 16) in a comic, grotesque, exaggerated
voice which serves to undermine the activity. It may be that S1 did not know the words of
the song very well, and so lost confidence and reverted to the comic. Whatever the
reason, there is more than one voice evident here: the voice which attempts to participate
in singing the Mother’s Day song, and the voice which subverts the celebration, and exudes hostility to the authorized heritage. Although some students are engaged in the activity, the teacher breaks off from this to admonish the group of boys who have treated Mother’s Day as an opportunity for carnivalesque humour, and dispatches them from the classroom with another threat to involve their mothers.

Discussion

What can we say, then, about the ways in which the linguistic practices of students and teachers in complementary schools are used to negotiate young people’s multilingual and multicultural identities? In this paper we have set out to examine some of the ‘unofficial’ discourses of the schools, as students responded to the teaching and learning of their heritage languages and ‘cultures’ in ways which enabled them to contest and negotiate the subject positions which were ascribed to them. A Bakhtinian analysis has enabled us to identify how meaning-making emerges as an ongoing dialogic process at a number of different interrelated levels. These are mocking voices, parodic voices, voices which clash with each other and are hostile to each other, voices which represent and recontextualise other voices, voices of oaths, curses and abuses, and voices of what Bakhtin calls the “bodily lower stratum” (1968:20). We will discuss these unofficial meaning-making discourses in relation to (i) parody, and (ii) the official and carnival worlds of the classroom.
Rampton (2006:31) builds on Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of ‘speech genres’ in arguing that in classrooms as elsewhere certain roles and relationships, certain patterns of activity, come to be expected, but “generic expectations and actual activity seldom form a perfect match, and the relationship between them is an important focus in political struggle”. In the classroom we investigated there appeared to be more than one set of expectations for the students: the ‘official’ genre of teacher-directed discourse, and the ‘unofficial’, carnivalesque genre of the market-place. In the two episodes examined in this paper we have seen students parodying their teachers’ intonation (e.g. “wait, wait, wait”), and parodying accepted classroom discourses (e.g. “uh-huh, uh-huh..uh-huh”). Both uttered in stylized discourse, both slight exaggerations of the usual, either in terms of intonation or frequency of reiteration, they are instances of “repetition as an act of difference, recontextualization, renewal” (Pennycook 2007:580), acts of “sameness that create difference” (ibid.:587). They are recontextualizations which position the students both within and without the classroom activity, as participants and non-participants, as they attempt to engage with the teacher-led activity while discursively positioning themselves at one remove from full participation. Secondly, students adopted stylized parodies of stereotypical ‘ethnic’ voices to mock each other, themselves, and generalized language learners of lower proficiency than themselves (“me not speak English”, “me not speak Chinese”). Talmy (2004) has argued that such discourse contributes to the reproduction of a form of linguicism which is officially sanctioned, and institutionally situated. Apparently unofficial and playful, the students’ parodic discourse constitutes and recontextualises the pejorative subject positioning of the lower proficiency language learner, and in so doing reproduces the hierarchych of linguicism which is often evident in
multilingual school systems. Possibly related to this parodic discourse was discourse in which one of the students gave Islamic names to his peers, positioning them perhaps as lower proficiency language learners.

Thirdly, the discourses of the students parodied ‘cultural/heritage’ practices. Throughout the eight schools we studied, we found frequent instances of the teaching of language in the context of the transmission of national, ‘cultural’, and heritage knowledge about the country of (teachers’ and families’) origin. Recent studies in heritage have argued that rather than being a static entity, ‘heritage’ is a ‘process or performance that is concerned with the production and negotiation of cultural identity, individual and collective memory, and social and cultural values’ (Smith 2007:2). Heritage as a process of meaning-making may ‘help us bind ourselves, or may see us become bound to, national or a range of sub-national collectives or communities’ (Smith 2006:66) as particular resources come to act as powerful symbols of, or mnemonics for, the past (Lipe 2007). People engage with ‘heritage’, appropriate it, and contest it (Harvey 2007). ‘Heritage’ may become a site at which identities are contested rather than imposed unproblematically. That is, those who seek to preserve and pass on certain sets of resources may find that the next generation either rejects imposed subject positions, contests the validity or significance of resources, or appropriates them for other purposes. In our study, while teachers and administrators of the schools believed that teaching ‘language’ and ‘heritage’ was a means of reproducing ‘national’ identity in the next generation, the imposition of such identities was often contested and re-negotiated by the students, as classroom interactions became sites where students occupied subject
positions which were at odds with those imposed by the institutions. In the brief episodes we examined in this paper we saw students in the Turkish classroom parody ‘heritage’ songs associated with a traditional festival, and engage in a parodic, mocking version of a traditional Turkish wedding-dance. The students moved between subject positions, or maintained more than one subject position simultaneously, as they both participated in the activity and derided it. The students’ discourse became a battleground on which to play out oppositions between the ‘heritage’ identity imposed by the school, and the students’ contestation and re-negotiation of such impositions. Their clowning and laughter, hostile to the reified, “immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 1968:10) version of heritage, created a moment of freedom from the school’s imposed ideological position.

Billig (2005:208) makes the point that “rebellious humour conveys an image of momentary freedom from the restraints of social convention”, and “constitutes a brief escape…a moment of transcendence”. In the examples here humour as rebellion, as escape, and even as transcendence, enables the students to challenge the validity of the authorized heritage, and indeed the authority of the teacher. However, Billig counsels that humour is not only at the disposal of the rebel, and can equally well be appropriated by the powerful. Referring to “the wishful thinking of Bakhtin that tyrants do not laugh properly”, Billig (2005:210) suggests that far from subverting the serious world of power, humour can strengthen it. To support his case Billig refers to examples of racist and other discriminatory joking. In fact Bakhtin’s argument in relation to the carnivalesque humour of the Middle Ages was not that it was always subversive or rebellious, but that it was ambiguous, at one and the same time mocking the powerful and restoring the social
order. Both subversive and conservative, it undermined the powerful only for a moment, before authority was re-established.

In our observations we saw clear distinctions between the official and carnival worlds of the classroom. Bakhtin proposed that “There is a sharp line of division between familiar speech and ‘correct’ language” (1968:320). We saw that the students were able to create in familiar speech a “second life” constituted in carnivalesque language and “organised on the basis of laughter” (Bakhtin 1968:8). For Bakhtin “The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, co-existed in their consciousness” (1968:96). The social world of the Middle Ages was of course very different from that of the students in our study, not least in the range and variety of sources on which late modern young people may draw. Nonetheless, Bakhtin’s thought on carnivalesque language is illuminating here. We saw that students in the Cantonese and Turkish schools created second, unofficial lives through the introduction of comic characters into the classrooms, and through the grotesque realism of the market-place. The classrooms became populated with football commentators, footballers, television presenters, cartoon characters, and other generalised media voices. These characters were all recontextualizations of voices heard elsewhere. Their introduction into the classroom was a means of generating laughter, the laughter of the unofficial, oppositional to authority and officialdom. It was more than this though. At the same time as creating comic effect, the recontextualisation of these characters enabled the students to introduce elements of popular culture, of their culture, into an environment dominated by the official agenda of language and heritage.
learning. These characters were created by students engaging in “a particular kind of performance – *stylisation*” (Rampton 2006:27). In just one example, the introduction (in the discourse of a student) of the highly stylised, American-accented voice of Barney Gumble, a character from ‘The Simpsons’ (“hey Homer, thanks for the Duff beer”), is apparently unconnected with anything that goes before or after. The mimic may be using precisely the same words, and precisely the same accent and intonation as voice actor Dan Castellanata, but no two apparently identical utterances made by different individuals can ever be truly alike (Day 2002). The context is all-important here, and the recontextualised voice takes on new shapes and meanings because it is uttered in the classroom. Comic and carnivalesque, the cartoon character’s voice contributes to the students’ unofficial, second lives. Barney Gumble represents the unofficial life of the students in the official world of the classroom.

In addition to introducing new characters to create the second life of the classroom, students introduced the language of oaths, curses and abuses, and the language of the body. Bakhtin (1968:411) argued that “Abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech”, and that in the language of the market-place these elements were often associated with the “language of the bowels and the phallus” (ibid. 317). We saw that in the Turkish classroom in particular, abusive and ‘grotesque’ language was used as the discourse of bartering and negotiation, just as in the medieval market-place. Bakhtin pointed out that “The people’s laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial times was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes” (1968:20). In addition to carnivalesque
snoring in the Cantonese classroom, we saw one of the key participant students in the Turkish school say “suck my balls man”, “shut the fuck up”, and “the one who sucks your dad’s dick”, as he haggled over business transactions in the file-sharing marketplace. This was not merely negative language (what Bakhtin calls “bare negation”, 1994:200), but was suffused with ambivalence. Contrary to the official world of teaching and learning, the student’s grotesque realism was an accepted discourse in the second life in the classroom. At the same time positive and negative, this was a language that was hostile to all that was completed, immortalised and official, but which created a world of creativity and laughter in which business could be transacted.

Lin and Luk (2005:94) propose that teachers should enable students to construct in the classroom “their own preferred worlds, preferred identities, and preferred voices”, and this has to begin with teachers’ deeper understanding of these worlds, identities, and voices. They suggest that such an understanding will enable teachers to “capitalise on the local resources of students to build bridges between students’ life world and what is required of them in the school world”. They propose explicit discussion with students of different social languages, and the imposed hierarchy of social languages in society. Indeed one example they suggest is for teachers to create an imaginary context in which students are asked to interview their favourite soccer stars. While agreeing with this argument in principle, we stop short of specific classroom recommendations here. We do suggest that there is considerable scope for further research in this area, however.
Conclusion

In this paper we analysed some of the voices we heard as we conducted linguistic ethnographic research in Cantonese and Turkish complementary schools in UK. They are voices which make meaning in creative, complex ways, voices of struggle, voices of negotiation, voices which bear the traces of histories and futures, voices in process. We found that meaning emerged as an ongoing dialogic process at different levels: in official discourses and unofficial discourses, and also in the ways in which students were able to move freely between the official and the unofficial. We saw students using varieties of parodic language to mock their teacher, to mock each other, to mock notional students as second language learners, and to mock their school’s attempts to transmit reified versions of ‘cultural heritage’. In addition, we saw students engaging in what Bakhtin (1968:96) called “two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect”. Students were able to create second lives in the classroom, where unofficial interactions and transactions could occur, in language that was carnivalesque in its grotesque realism. We saw meaning-making as dialogic process, as social actors in complementary schools represented themselves and others in voices which cut across boundaries in complex, creative, sophisticated ways.

1 ‘Investigating Multilingualism in Complementary Schools in Four Communities’ (RES-000-23-1180) Creese, A., Blackledge, A., Lytra, V., Martin, P., and Wei, Li.
Some scholars have suggested that the works of Volosinov were in fact written by Bakhtin. Others disagree. In the absence of irrefutable evidence either way, we are adopting the usual convention of citing Volosinov’s works separately.

Key to transcripts

<italic font> Turkish or Cantonese in English translation
[plain font in square brackets] contextual commentary

References


