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Linguistic Superdiversity and English-Medium Higher Education in Qatar

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This chapter problematizes several concepts and categories which persist in writing studies despite phenomenal changes in the global landscape of learning and scholarship. The author argues that these serve to perpetuate a monolingual ideology incongruous with today's polycentric, transnational, translingual world. New discourses of internationalization raise important considerations but don't fully engage the complexities of emerging global sites of learning and communication. Using a critical sociolinguistics frame, the author examines English-medium higher education in the State of Qatar, a site of "linguistic superdiversity," to pose new questions about how we theorize and do writing studies in today's globally connected world.

Keywords: linguistic superdiversity; critical sociolinguistics; linguistic landscape studies; monolingual ideology; postmonolingual ideology

The emergence of new global sites of English-medium higher education presents scholars in the field of writing studies the opportunity to re-examine the theories and practices that are transported and translated to new contexts, and also to reflect on their continued relevance at their origins. Recent work on internationalization in the scholarship and practice of college composition calls for a multilingual approach, the rejection of monolingualism, and the adoption of a translingual norm (Horner, NeCamp & Donahue, 2011). This is an important direction for the field, but while Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue (2011) advocate for a "translingual model of multilingualism emphasizing working across languages" (p. 270), their argument rests on a view of languages that has been problematized recently by scholars in sociolinguistics. Adopting a critical sociolinguistics frame, I argue that we need to begin to question several foundational concepts and categories in the theory

and practice of writing studies in order to make sense of and learn from new global sites of college writing. Taking the example of English-medium higher education in the State of Qatar in the Arabian Gulf, as part of the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region more broadly, I introduce a critical sociolinguistic perspective, derived largely from Jan Blommaert's (2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2015) recent and groundbreaking work, which can help writing studies rethink some of our translanguing assumptions to better empower learners and scholars in the twenty-first century.

Qatar is a small, independent Arabian Gulf state adjacent to the United Arab Emirates. It has only one major city, its capital, Doha, home to the national university as well as numerous foreign institutions including American, British, Canadian, Dutch, and French (for detailed discussion of international branch campuses, see Miller and Pessoa, this volume). Because of its small size (roughly 11,000 km² or 4,000 m²), centralized population, and educational sites in the capital, Qatar is generally used in global discussions to refer to Doha and all other areas of the country together. Qatar offers an important example of an emerging global educational site that resists some of the basic categories of mainstream writing studies, including the categories of first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) users of English, international, and foreign students. Owing to shifts in global migration forces and patterns, Qatar's population is now comprised of approximately 220,000 Qatari nationals and 1.5 million expatriates, creating a workforce that is nearly 95% foreign (Ibnouf, Doub, & Knight, 2014). Foreign, however, has complex nuances in Qatar as well as in other Gulf societies, where long-term expatriate residents and their children cannot seek citizenship; consequently, they remain local but always peripheral and never integrated systematically (see Ahmad, 2012, for analysis of migrant labor in the Gulf; and Vora, 2015, for an interesting case study). This intense diversity is also evident in higher education as a microcosm of society in general.

On a positive note, this diversity results in a vibrant inter-mixing of peoples who connect and communicate across the invisible borders of their adopted and heritage cultures. It is not at all uncommon to encounter students at English-medium, U.S. universities in Qatar who use two different languages or dialects at home, another at primary or secondary school, and attend university in English. As a teacher of first-year writing in Qatar, and in my interactions with student writers across their college years in the MENA region, I have known many students with "native-like" American accents and fluency who taught themselves English by watching cartoons and had very limited formal instruction at school. Still, their language abilities and varying levels of literacy in other languages support their integration of English as

a resource among others. Conversations outside classrooms reveal a fluidity born of the translingual realities of the twenty-first century (see also Ronesi, this volume). Successful communication is not simply a product of high levels of proficiency but an outcome of developing the competence to navigate multiple contexts and registers to meet a given need, whether to connect on Facebook, text a classmate, or write a paper in first-year composition. While the situation may appear similar to that of some campuses in the US, the multiplicity of linguistic resources drawn upon in global sites like Qatar surfaces a number of assumptions about how languages and their acquisition are understood in mainstream composition scholarship.

From this perspective, writing studies is well served by related theorizing within the field of applied linguistics, particularly from the subfields of second-language acquisition and sociolinguistics. A growing body of writing scholarship already engages with work in second-language writing or draws from sociolinguistics in general (for example, Canagarajah, 2002, 2005, 2012; Cox & Zawacki, 2011; Matsuda, 2013; Matsuda & Silva, 2014; Silva & Matsuda, 2012; Zawacki & Cox, 2011; and the *Journal of Second Language Writing*); however, this work tends to divide into the two distinct camps of “second language” and “translingual” writing research and theory, both claiming similar but different foci and both often stopping short of addressing the complexities and tensions that lie underneath the common categories of languages and writers (see Atkinson, Crusan, Matsuda, Ortmeier-Hooper, Ruecker, Simpson, & Tardy, 2015, for an overview). Further, while the terms “native speaker,” “first-language writer,” “second-language writer,” or “multilingual learner” are widely used to denote language differences in writing, the categories in use might actually constrain our understandings and obscure our view of the underlying ideology.

In this chapter, I will focus on the potential of a critical sociolinguistic frame, largely informed by the pioneering work of Jan Blommaert, for advancing understandings of writing in translingual global contexts like MENA. Taking Blommaert’s (2013a) work in linguistic landscape studies as a starting point, I explore Qatar as a site of linguistic superdiversity and then discuss the implications of superdiversity on academic writing in English-medium higher education. Against this backdrop, I go on to problematize some current constructs, terminology and ideological assumptions in U.S. English writing studies, pointing toward the need to ask some different questions, to “rethink and unthink” the concept of first and second languages and the writers, international or other, who are identified with them. I suggest that these terms no longer serve us in writing studies, and that instead of helping the field move forward in a global era, they keep us stuck in old thinking that is tied to an

ideology few sociolinguistic scholars would still espouse.

Critical Sociolinguistics and Writing in Global Contexts

Blommaert argues that critical sociolinguistics can help us reassess how we understand language in writing as part of “changing language in a changing society” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 2). Critical sociolinguistics takes us beyond traditional understandings of discrete languages in homogenous societies, where there are first- and second-language users, and promotes instead “a sociolinguistics of mobile resources, not immobile languages” (Blommaert, 2010, p. 102). This view moves us away from long-held ideas about what languages are and how people communicate through them, as well as how, where, why and by whom academic writing takes shape.

Indeed, a very useful approach to analyzing and understanding the dynamics of language use is found in linguistic landscape studies (LLS), which are “descriptive as well as analytical” in “documenting the landscapes of today’s globalized cities” (Blommaert, 2013a, p. 1). LLS help make sense of the shifting and emerging terrain of linguistic varieties and their deployment in meaning making and can potentially move us away from viewing a physical space as localized and static, to a more dynamic space of cultural, political and social interaction and negotiation. LLS can also serve as a “diagnostic of social, cultural and political structures inscribed in the linguistic landscape” (Blommaert, 2013a, p. 3) and offer a means to more deeply understand and engage with complex, modern, human networks.

The LLS approach is particularly suited for making sense of Qatar, which in the past decade has experienced a 124% growth in its population (Ibnouf et al., 2014), as it advances in a visionary process of development. Strategically building its human capacity for a future that relies on knowledge production instead of a carbon-based economy (General Secretariat for Development and Planning, 2008), this small Gulf state in the MENA region now hosts seven premier U.S. universities on its Education City campus, which claim a collective faculty and student body “from 89 different nationalities with diverse backgrounds, cultures, religions, financial status, and citizenship” (Ibnouf et al., 2014, p. 47). The great diversity of these university student populations has often had an unanticipated impact on the program, the faculty and the learners themselves (see Hodges & Kent; Miller & Pessoa; Rudd & Telfaci this volume) in ways that are just now being explored in Qatar as well as in similarly developing sites in MENA and elsewhere. This new scale of diversity that is being experienced is referred to as *superdiversity* and is discussed in detail in the following sections.

Superdiversity is a term first proposed by social anthropologist Steven Vertovec (2007) to describe a new level of diversity the world is currently experiencing—a diversification of diversity—brought about by shifting forces of migration and mobility. A multitude of social, economic and political forces brings people from a great range of origins to new locations, creating categories of migrants that resist traditional definitions and force new thinking about who moves where and why. The reasons for migration, the direction of movement and the rise of new modes of communication have allowed people to connect and stay connected where they would previously have experienced more fragmentation and disconnection. As a result, people continue to draw upon multiple social and linguistic resources, which they blend into new activities and interactions. That is, new patterns of migration and new possibilities of interconnectivity and intercommunication have created “a condition distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants” (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). Such a shift in positioning and contact calls us to “reorient some fundamental approaches within the social scientific study of migration in order to address and to better understand complex and arguably new social formations” (Meissner & Vertovec, 2014, p. 542). Among the new social formations are contexts of learning in higher education where there is now a mixing of people who geographically, socioeconomically and linguistically might otherwise never have come together. Recognizing the challenges and opportunities of this phenomenon allows us to explore previously held constructs in a new and fluid space that should necessarily invite a shift in thinking to meet the complex characteristics of the context and time.

Qatar is now not only home to a minority of native nationals together with regional neighbors and long-term expat guests and workers from distant origins; it is fast becoming a “a world of ‘postmigrants’” or “second-generation immigrants” who “do not so much mark the phenomenon of migration as that of the aftermath of it.” (Yildiz, 2012, p. 170). Alongside still swelling numbers of migrant laborers who are often the focus of attention in the international press, new generations of postmigrants add increased diversity to the socioeconomic and sociocultural tapestry of Qatar. These “multidimensional shifts in migration patterns” (Meissner & Vertovec, 2014, p. 541) necessarily alter the linguistic landscape of the emerging superdiverse global sites. It is this linguistic superdiversity that is of importance in the discussion of writing studies in the MENA region. While the scale of the city of Doha and, indeed, the entire country is smaller than that of cities traditionally considered global hubs (like London, for example), Qatar has many of the features and “inter-

related dimensions of globalization and global cities characteristics” (Block, 2008, p. 2) that, given the shifting dynamics of the region, are becoming more common in other areas of MENA as well.

Qatar, then, can be usefully seen as a site of superdiversity, a convergence of peoples, cultures, and languages, for varied and unpredictable reasons, that is at once dynamic and integrative *in situ*, as well as constantly and immediately connected to multiple points of origin through easily accessed digital technologies. The result is a vibrantly varied population that communicates across and among its constituents, orally and in writing, across numerous speech communities, for work, family, education, travel, social systems and services, or leisure enjoyment. The students who populate first-year composition courses at U.S. universities in Qatar are part of this “postmigrant” era; they are master navigators of their polycentric, transnational, and translingual world (Canagarajah, 2012).

As Blommaert (2013b) writes, superdiversity “denies us the comfort of a set of easily applicable assumptions about our object, its features and meanings” (p. 3). What assumptions do we make of the students in a U.S. composition course in the US versus those in the MENA region? In what ways do we leverage students’ language rich backgrounds, their metacognitive awareness of language systems, and the ease with which they move between identities and spaces of their worlds?

In the US, for example, there is a tendency to divide composition students very broadly into the two categories of native speakers and second-language learners, categories which are likely not accurate in the first instance and which obscure the complexities of students’ language and cultural experiences. For example, when we consider a student a native speaker of English (leaving aside the question of the validity of conflating speech and writing), we more likely mean a monolingual English user, someone we assume to have not just a tacit and intuitive facility with speaking and writing in English, but one who also shares a set of values, experiences, and knowledge about English that is consistent with the academy we work in, the materials we use, and the developmental pathways we anticipate our students will follow. Those are sizable assumptions. Further, in our U.S. writing classrooms, we often do not acknowledge the language other than English that our students bring to the classroom or make the effort to surface, value and draw upon other literacies and repertoires, or take advantage of the metalinguistic knowledge they may have from learning and using other languages. Rather, the monolingual paradigm continues to structure how we teach and understand our learners, as a number of U.S. scholars have pointed out (e.g., Horner, NeCamp & Donahue, 2011; Matsuda, 2006).

In Qatar, we cannot start from a position that assumes and privileges a shared understanding of and set of experiences with English (or even Arabic)—not cultural, educational, or linguistic. Given the great diversity, we have to assume there will be very little in common among the students in the ways they have learned and used English in their lives prior to studying at an English-medium university. We must begin from a new common starting point. As a class unfolds and the students learn more about each other, their rich, lived language experiences typically come to the fore, and a new space of hybridity is created where there is no one who represents the monolingual native speaker norm. In composition classes in Qatar and other MENA sites, superdiversity compels us to deconstruct the ideologies and practices behind traditional categories of learners.

Blommaert (2013a) poses two central questions about superdiversity:

The interaction of these two forces—new and more complex forms of migration, and new and more complex forms of communication and knowledge circulation—has generated a situation in which two questions have become hard to answer: who is the Other? And who are we? The Other is now a category in constant flux, a moving target about whom very little can be presupposed. (p. 5)

When we pose these questions about who we are and who the writers are at English-medium, U.S. universities in Qatar, we find it difficult to provide simple answers: Who is the other? Who are we? Both of these seemingly essential categories shift into a new light when explored in the context of superdiverse sites like Qatar. Further, who is the second-language learner, the native speaker, the foreign student, the international student? The categories no longer easily apply.

In a recent writing class, for example, one of my students grew up speaking French with his mother, a regional dialect of Arabic with his father and siblings, Modern Standard Arabic at grammar school, and both French and English in high school. At an English-medium university in a third country, what category of writer and learner applies to him? Or to the half-Spanish, half-Egyptian student who has been in English-language schools since kindergarten but speaks Spanish and Arabic at home: is she a second language learner of English? In what ways would an ESL writing course respond to the complexities of her language knowledge and use? Student profiles such as the two examples here are in fact the norm and not the exception in MENA (see Annous, Nicolas & Townsend; Arnold et al.; Hodges & Kent; Jarkas & Fakhreddine; Miller & Pessoa; Ronesi; Rudd & Telafici, this volume). As

identities and language profiles become ever more multi-layered, fitting complex and dynamic human beings into fixed categories of identity that describe a less-connected, less-mobile, less-global world of the past, seems not only improbable but totally unhelpful.

Asking such questions from within MENA about MENA students should push us to ask the same questions in other contexts, particularly in the US: What does it mean to be a first or second language writer in a world where heterogeneous identities are common and mobility and communication displace borders and distance? What is useful in labeling a language as a defined and discrete system when “languages” such as English, Arabic, and Spanish have so many varieties and dialects? We only need look to Arabic for an excellent example. Arabic is not simply diglossic, the two varieties being Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is debated and contested in the literature as a native language or mother tongue (Albirini, 2016), and a regional dialect, of which there are a great many varieties. Qatari, Lebanese, and Egyptian Arabic, for example, are distinctly different dialects, all equally different from MSA. Consequently, an Egyptian student who has moved to Qatar will not only know Egyptian Arabic, but will have learned English and MSA at school, possibly French as well, the Gulf dialect more generally, and the Qatari dialect, too. It becomes inaccurate to consider such a student in the English composition classroom a second-language user of English. Linear understandings of language acquisition are rapidly giving way to more dynamic views of development and use (Larsen-Freeman, 2012).

Linguistic Superdiversity and Its Implications for Writing Studies

If we adopt a critical sociolinguistic perspective, then we can start to see language and superdiversity “as a space of synthesis, a point of convergence or a nexus of developments” where new understandings are possible, and “[to] see complexity, hybridity, ‘impurity’ and other features of ‘abnormal’ socio-linguistic objects as ‘normal’” (Blommaert, 2013b, pp. 2-3), as today’s global renditions of yesterday’s fixed forms. That is to say that sites like Qatar open a space for thinking differently about how we understand and respond to language in context in writing studies. Examining the rich linguistic diversity in English-medium higher education in Qatar, we may find, as Blommaert say, that:

a space of theoretical work emerge[s] in which “exceptional” forms of language [are] increasingly seen as privileged lenses

through which a different gaze on all of language became possible. In other words: starting from exceptionally “unusual” language, “normal” language also [begins] to look different. (Blommaert, 2013b, p. 4.)

When we look more closely at what we might have traditionally categorized as “learner English” or “foreign student writing,” we might start to understand writing of all varieties in a new light.

The concept of superdiversity also helps us understand that many writers in today’s transnational world do not operate in one language as discrete and separate from the others that they use. Rather,

[i]n a superdiverse context, mobile subjects engage with a broad variety of groups, networks and communities, and their language resources are consequently learned through a wide variety of trajectories, tactics and technologies, ranging from formal language learning to entirely informal “encounters” with language. (Blommaert & Backus, 2012, p. 1)

In arguing for “a mature sociolinguistics of writing,” Blommaert challenges us to “unthink the unproductive distinction between ‘language’ and ‘writing’, to view writing as the object of sociolinguistic inquiry” (2012b, p. 1). To do so, we also need to ask new questions, starting with how we view language itself. Indeed, Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen and Møller (2011), arguing from a sociolinguistic perspective challenge the widely held view that “‘language’ can be separated into different ‘languages’” (p. 23), such as English or Arabic. They describe languages instead as “abstractions, they are sociocultural or ideological constructions” (p. 23). Like Blommaert, they call us to move away from a bounded view of languages that can be categorically separated into first and second (or third or fourth) languages and acknowledge instead the rich complexity of resources deployed in social communication. In the view of Blommaert and Rampton (2012, p.1), “languages have now been denaturalized, the linguistic is treated as just one semiotic among many”—in other words, static categories such as L1 and L2 cannot persist.

With regard to monolingual ideology that is called into critical view, Yildiz (2014), in her exploration of the postmonolingual condition of the twenty-first century, argues that:

Recognizing the workings of the monolingual paradigm . . . requires a fundamental reconceptualization of European and European-inflected thinking about language, identity and modernity. For monolingualism is much more than a simple

quantitative term designating the presence of just one language. Instead, it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. (p. 2)

When we choose to view language through a postmonolingual lens and to engage the tensions between monolingualism and multilingualism, as Yildez compels us to do, we can untangle the categories and concepts of first, second, foreign (etc.) language, so writing studies can more meaningfully engage in global contexts in a postmonolingual world.

This change in our viewpoint calls for a paradigmatic shift in writing studies: We need to move beyond clearly demarcated views of languages, fixed in a rigid order of acquisition along a linear path of development, toward a more dynamic understanding of situated language development and use, and view writing within this larger frame as an object of critical sociolinguistic inquiry that informs both the teaching and learning of writing.

As teachers and scholars of writing in post-secondary education, we can apply this thinking to our work by first expanding our awareness of ourselves and others, and opening our theorizing to cross pollination from related fields, applied linguistics and critical sociolinguistics among them. We can then critically examine the assumptions of the theoretical frameworks, curricula, textbooks, and assessment tools that have structured writing studies; the language and behaviors that shape our scholarship and practice, revisiting our vocabulary in light of new understandings and discarding terms that might be holding us back. For example, categories of writers such as “native speaker” and “ESL” have been left unexamined too long; they tie us to a past out of sync with today’s reality and potentially create artificial dichotomies that can polarize our thinking. Reconsidering these terms will actually help us re-evaluate how we order and organize our thinking and our field. Many of the authors of the chapters that follow describe student bodies that already challenge and problematize these entrenched terms in their work in Lebanon (Annous, Nicolas & Townsend; Arnold et al.; Jarkas & Fakhreddine), the UAE (Ronesi) as well as others in Qatar (Hodges & Kent; Miller & Pessoa; Rudd & Telfaci). Critically examining our work invites us to move away from old labels and the static categories they prescribe, and, in searching for new language to describe and develop the work of our field, we will undoubtedly come to new understandings. The place to begin evolving the paradigm is in the language itself.

Conclusion

Recent attention to internationalization in composition in North American higher education is causing the field of composition to reconsider monolingual assumptions in our pedagogy and scholarship (Horner, NeCamp & Donhue, 2011; Matsuda, 2006). Further, as Donahue (2009) points out, while our focus has been on how “the US experience is being internationalized,” we need to consider how the “import/export focal points create blind spots,” in how we understand the assumptions behind our own thinking and practice. As Zawacki and Habib (2014) argue, it is “time to re-examine our role as teachers of language . . . and to consider what new or different questions we in writing studies should be asking about where and how we can attend to students’ language development—cognitive and sociocultural, grammatical and rhetorical, linguistic (fluency and accuracy)—within the writing processes we’re teaching our students to employ” (p. 651), as well as how “to generate new questions about the languaging and writing processes through which students acquire academic writing competence” (p. 655).

In Qatar, and in other MENA contexts, we find ourselves teaching, researching and doing our own writing in the context of superdiversity in a new transnational state: In our daily realities, our students move into a space they own together, unbound by first and second language distinctions, by communicating and writing in an English of higher education as part of a superdiverse context. How does a space like Qatar invite us to rethink and unthink the monolingual assumptions and constructs that dominate U.S.-based writing studies, whether at international branch campuses or locally operated extensions of American (or other) institutions?

As we consider a critical sociolinguistic frame in our rethinking and unthinking, we are challenged by Blommaert (2015), who asks whether “certain academic discourses [are] ‘clearly’ locked into one or another culture” thus providing “an implicit judgment of the legitimacy of voice” (p. 1). When we ask this question of writing studies, we should not be too surprised to find that U.S.-based discourses appear to enjoy this implicit legitimacy of voice, as evidenced in the content of textbooks and scholarly journals alike, whether discourses around student writers, pedagogies, or scholarship. We should not be surprised, either, that we still seem to be “locked” into a predominantly American culture of theorizing and doing composition studies, where the categories of L1, L2, native speaker, and so on continue to constrain both our thinking and our impact. Blommaert helps to expose the underlying monolingual ideology and the terminology and assumptions that hold us back from more meaningful international exchanges, as instances of multidirectional,

transnational meaning making in a mobile and connected reality.

Along these lines, Yildiz (2014) challenges our rethinking and unthinking further with her question: “What is the relationship between language and identity today? According to the monolingual paradigm, there is one privileged language, the mother tongue” (p. 202). In complex and superdiverse sites like Qatar, the idea of “mother tongue,” as I’ve argued, is problematic when hybrid realities call for much greater flexibility and fluidity in communication, and a “mother tongue” becomes just one of many resources. Yildiz’s (2014) message is powerful for teaching writing in the superdiverse MENA region. As she says, “Recognizing the monolingual paradigm and its workings can be a step towards denaturalizing monolingualism as an unquestioned norm and standard according to which other linguistic configurations and practices are measured” (p. 206). For the MENA region, this means recognizing and moving away from the traditional monolingual assumptions of U.S. composition studies and developing instead a more locally situated but globally informed approach to the teaching of writing. There is much opportunity in thinking about superdiversity and a critical sociolinguistics of writing in Qatar and the MENA region, but also anywhere else where writing is taught, explored, practiced, studied, developed, and discussed; opportunity to question the language we use to organize and interpret the world of writers and writing. If we reflect on the lessons of Qatar and dare to unthink what no longer serves but constrains us, then we are poised to create “a new culture in our scholarship of writing” (Blommaert, 2015, p. 2). This new culture is one that will recognize and value the complexities of living, learning and communicating in a post-monolingual world and will reconfigure teaching and scholarship in this light.

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