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AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE BAYNHAM

Antonio Vicente Casas Pedrosa

Antonio Vicente Casas Pedrosa is a research assistant in the Department of English Philology at the University of Jaén. His main areas of interest include English morphology, syntax and semantics.

Mike Baynham is Professor of TESOL in the School of Education of the University of Leeds. He is currently Chair of the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) for the period 2001-2003, and co-convenor with Mastin Prinsloo of the International Applied Linguistics Association (AILA) Scientific Commission on Literacy. Before that, he worked in both London (where he was involved in Adult and Higher Education) and Sydney (as Director of the Centre for Language and Literacy at the University of Technology).

Although his academic background is in Sociolinguistics, he has always been involved in Applied Linguistics, his main research interests including oral narrative, speech representation, and socially situated perspectives on literacy. He has published a substantial number of research articles and books, among which it is worth highlighting Literacy Practices (Longman, 1995), and "Narrative as evidence in literacy research" (Linguistics in Education, 2000).

Professor Baynham gave a talk at the XX Congreso Nacional de AESLA, held at the University of Jaén in April 2002. His lecture was entitled "Taking the social turn: the New Literacy Studies and SLA" and this interview is aimed at discussing more deeply some of the main aspects dealt with in that talk.

Q: Before going to the University of Leeds, you worked in both London and Sydney. Could you briefly tell us about your experience in these different institutions, fulfilling various functions? Are there any specific differences between working in a British academic context and an Australian one? Are they as separate academically or scientifically as they are geographically?

A: Maybe to answer this question I could tell you a little bit about my experiences. In London I worked, first of all, in London Education Authority in the Adult Education Programme organising classes in English as a Second Language, as it was called then, and Adult Literacy. Then I moved to Goldsmiths' College where I was again involved with Adult Literacy, but also with the beginning of what was called the Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) Group, which was a group committed to developing the research agenda in adult literacy research.

When I moved to Sydney, I was working in the University of Technology, Sydney, in TESOL and Adult Literacy teacher education. I moved from being a practitioner to being a teacher educator. I was very influenced in Australia by Systemic Functional Linguistics, which has a very important influence with the presence in Sydney of Michael

Halliday and others. While I would not call myself a systemicist, I think I was very influenced by their approach.

Another very interesting feature of the Australian context is the fact that Australia had a National Language Policy which was developed by Joe Lo Bianco. For me, coming from England, where there was the influence of the conservative government and the de-emphasising of a lot of important developments in language education for political and economic reasons, to come to Australia, where there was a National Language Policy and very generous funding for research and programmes in language education, was a wonderful experience, and in the years of the nineties, when I was in Australia, there was a very important and interesting development in language education which I was fortunate to be part of, and this takes me up to my coming to Leeds in 2000.

Q: From oral narrative you developed an interest in speech representation in both narrative and non-narrative contexts. Which are, for you, the main differences between the way speech is represented in narrative and non-narrative contexts?

A: I will say, first of all, that speech representation is a very pervasive feature of language. We find it

in all sorts of contexts, in all sorts of text types. I started off researching narrative, as you suggest, but I noticed that in some of the data I was collecting in my doctoral research, which is not narrative in the canonical sense, but more a kind of generalising, representing what people typically do rather than what happens in this particular instance in time. I called this *generalizing* or *generic* narrative. Speech representation plays a part in these generic narratives: representations not of particular utterances but of utterances which are understood as repeated, typical utterances.

Now the value of that is that it provides a way of deconstructing what is called 'the verbatim hypothesis' of speech representation (the notion that direct speech representation faithfully represents the actual original words which are spoken). Deborah Tannen has talked about the notion of

'constructed dialogue' and it becomes very clear, if you are looking at speech representation in other text types than narrative, or in types of narrative such as hypothetical narrative, based on possible not actual event scenarios, where there could not possibly be an original utterance, that speech representation is indeed constructed dialogue.

I found that, for myself, a very important moment, I think, involved making the shift from seeing speech as representing or reproducing reality to seeing speech as somehow constructing reality, which was an important shift for me, theoretically.

So, the resources for representing speech in discourse are, in a sense, quite similar in narrative and non-narrative contexts, but it is the reasons, the purposes to which they are put to use, which are different.

Q: In your lecture, you spoke about "the New Literacy Studies", of Literacy Studies taking

"the social turn" two decades ago. Which were, in your opinion, the main features of the then dominant psycholinguistic model of literacy learning?

A: I spoke, first of all, about the important shift which was brought in by the psycholinguistic perspective and I am thinking particularly of the work of the Goodmans, for they actually focused on acts of reading. So, there was a focus on the actual activity of reading and that was an empirical base to the study of reading, which is based on people engaging with texts. That was, as far as I am concerned, a positive feature.

The limitation, for me and others who take the social perspective on reading, is that it did not sufficiently take into account the social environment, the contexts, the institutional and local environments in which acts of reading take place.

So, while I am not wanting to lose touch with the kind of empirical base which is so significant in the psycholinguistic perspective, I would want to open up consideration of a wider range of influences on reading activities and processes than are typically included in

the psycholinguistic perspective, which focuses on the individual reader engaging with texts or in writing compositions. So, that would be the difference.

Q: What then has this "social turn" involved?

A: The 'social turn' has involved a focus, as I have suggested just now, on acts or literacy events and activities in context. So, it looks empirically at the ways that literacy is used in everyday contexts of use. Now, this approach was very much the ethnography of communication perspective and it was developed primarily in the work of Brian Street (his book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* came out in 1984, and was very influential), and Shirley Brice

I found that, for myself, a very important moment, I think, involved making the shift from seeing speech as representing or reproducing reality to seeing speech as somehow constructing reality, which was an important shift for me, theoretically.

Heath's *Ways with Words*, which came out in 1983. So, these were two landmark publications which suggested that, in order to understand literacy, we need to investigate it in context of use, that we look at literacy events (events in the sense of the ethnography of communication paradigm). But Street also suggested very convincingly that all these sorts of practices are the ways that relations of power, ideological perspectives are played out in everyday activity. So, literacy provides a kind of evidence of all sorts of social relationships and structuring. It is a very rich site for research.

Q: You mentioned the new model highlighting the social construction of both knowledge and learning. In what ways is this new trend laying emphasis on this social dimension?

A: One of the directions the New Literacy Studies have taken is into the study of what is called 'academic literacies'; in other words, literacies in the environment of higher education and study. In this environment, if you like, the purpose of university studies is to acquire knowledge. I think from the New Literacy Studies perspective we look at the ways in which language and literacy construct knowledge, at how there is a mutual relationship between the construction of knowledge and the development of abilities with texts, capacities to engage with texts.

So, for example, if you take a discipline like Mathematics or Science, or Nursing, or English, we would look at the way in which knowledge is constructed in these disciplines, what part the writing practices take in the construction of knowledge, and how the students become adept or fluent in the writing practices as it is required of them in terms of the particular academic discourse community. So, in a sense, it requires researching the context and the text, researching both the academic context, the environment, asking what are the typical types of writing in a particular discipline, community, and how do the students, the learners, seen as novices, become experts or adepts in the ways with words of that particular discourse community. That would be the problematic of a new literacy perspective on writing in disciplines. So, always the emphasis is on the 'situatedness' of writing in context, which is clearly the ethnographic perspective.

In my own work, I see it in terms of the notion of 'texts' and 'practices'. Of course, we need a focus on 'texts', and we need to deploy the resources of linguistic analysis to analyse texts, but we also need to see texts as a form of social activity, of social practice, which is fulfilling purposes and goals in particular environments and contexts; in this case, it is the context of the discipline.

Q: It seems that "the social movement" has to do not only with Literacy Studies but also with Second Language Acquisition research. In fact, there was a "shift from the psychological focus on motivation towards notions of identity, subjectivity and investment". What roles do these notions play in SLA research nowadays? Have they replaced other concepts such as "personality" or "learner variables"?

A: In my talk I was trying to point to the directions in which second language learning research should be going. Certainly, the work of Bonny Peirce on identity, subjectivity, and investment has shifted the ground in studies of motivation, but there is certainly, I think, a large body of research which is taking a broadly psychological perspective on second language learning. I think what I am suggesting is that, in parallel with the shift in literacy studies, we should also be opening up second language research to a broader range of theoretical influences, including the kind of perspectives on language that have been developing the Discourse Analysis perspectives on language, Critical Discourse Analysis, Functional Linguistics; that there should be a broader range of theoretical contributions to the problematic of second language learning.

So, whereas for the past two decades there has been a substantial development in the area of literacy from this social perspective, this has not been the case in the field of second language learning. There have, of course, been recent developments, suggesting a possible shifting of the theoretical landscape; I am thinking particularly of the work in sociocultural theory of Jim Lantolf and others, and the work I mentioned of Bonny Peirce. These are two examples of this kind of opening up and in my own work I would like to explore the potential

of the New Literacy Studies perspective as a way of opening up the field of second language learning to a wider range of theoretical influences.

Q: You speak of some authors, such as Gibbons, who use neo-Vygotskian theory, systemic functional linguistics, and SLA theory in order to “resituate classroom-based second language learning in a theoretical way”. How can these approaches be useful for achieving that aim?

A: There has been a considerable amount of work over the last two decades on classroom discourse. In fact, as we know, the Birmingham School of Discourse Analysis started with the analysis of classroom data. So, we have got the tradition of understanding classrooms as constructed through discourse, we have got an SLA focus on the notion of ‘task’ and ‘task-based learning’, and we have got this new emphasis on the interpersonal construction of learning, not the intrapersonal, which is the neo-Vygotskian perspective.

Now what Pauline Gibbons does in her work is to bring these three trends together to show how language learning can be constructed in classrooms in a quite detailed way. So, she is using a detailed analysis which you can get from classroom-based discourse analysis combined with notions derived from second language learning theory to construct an account of how learners’ learning can be stretched by interactions with the teachers in terms of their own proximal development. In her case, she is looking at Science classrooms, looking at how classrooms’ scientific knowledge can be constructed in discourse. So, that is really the focus, and I think it is a really productive area. Related to this, I think perhaps second language learning theory has not been very good at engaging with content knowledge. So, if we are

looking at language learning not just in an ELT class, but language learning in a subject area like Primary Science, again we need a wider range of theoretical perspectives to account for the kind of learning that goes on.

In my work, I have been very influenced by the work of Jay Lemke, whose work on the classroom, *The Discourse of Science Teaching*, provides a very interesting model of classroom-based discourse analysis, and the systemic perspective (the Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective) allows one to specify not just what is common to classrooms, but what is specific about particular classrooms. So, that is really what I think this approach opens.

One of the ways we can think about theory is as a tool for thinking with, if you think about the

Vygotskian notion of the semiotic tool; we have material tools, we have semiotic tools, and theory is a tool for thinking with, and particular theories enable particular kinds of thoughts which would not have necessarily been enabled by other theoretical tools. So, if

[...] I would like to explore the potential of the New Literacy Studies perspective as a way of opening up the field of second language learning to a wider range of theoretical influences.

we deploy, for example, Systemic Functional Linguistics as a theoretical tool, it enables us to gain access to ideas around the construction of particular kinds of knowledge, disciplinary knowledge which would not necessarily be available from other kinds of theories of language.

Q: In addition, there are other theoretical constructs in both the New Literacy Studies and in socio-cultural theory that are bringing about a new theorisation of second language learning. In your lecture you mentioned some of them (for instance, the notion of ‘discourse communities’ and ‘communities of practice’ or the notion of ‘literacy and language practices’); which, if any, plays the most relevant part? Or are all of them of equal importance?

A: First, the question of modality (in your question you say that the New Literacy Studies and socio-cultural theory are bringing about a

new theorisation of second language learning). I think that what I was suggesting is at this stage more tentative: that they have a potential to bring about a new theorisation of learning. The notion of 'discourse community', 'communities of practice', makes a lot of sense in terms of classroom-based learning both in schools and universities. A community of practice makes sense in the notion of language learning in a workplace. So, I would see both of those as being important constructs looking at situated learning in institutions.

'Literacy and language practices', as I suggested in my talk, signal an ethnography of communication perspective on researching language learning. So, I would be suggesting that we could develop a research agenda looking at language learning in context, which would involve sampling language use across a variety of contexts in which the language learner was using it. So, I would see all of them as contributing to the agenda; I do not want to overemphasise the values of one construct against the other. In fact, the notion of the 'language' or 'literacy practice' implies the notion of 'the discourse community' or 'the community of practice'; they are very much part of the same process.

Q: You also examined the way in which all those constructs can be useful for "a project of 're-socialising' SLA". What might be the main benefits of this project?

A: To me, the key word is the notion of 'relevance'. In Applied Linguistics theory, we evaluate our theories not just in descriptive and explanatory terms, but also in terms of relevance, asking how relevant is our research agenda to the actual practical problem that is being investigated.

So, I would argue that the re-socialising of SLA would produce a more grounded and relevant theory of second language learning for classroom teachers and learners; the benefit would be in terms of relevance to the project of teaching and learning. Often SLA theories are presented to us as a theoretical project that is not necessarily linked to practical outcomes. So, I would be emphasising relevance.

Q: As for the research programme related to this project, what could be the main areas of interest? Why?

A: Well, I think this follows from what I have said already, that it would involve investigating language learning and use in context, in context of use, and this could be in schools or in classrooms, in both formal and informal learning. We would not necessarily assume that all learning takes place in classrooms; we would be investigating contexts of use in the different environments in which people have to learn language, in workplaces, and in everyday life. So, the purpose would be to provide a more relevant theory and account of second language learning.

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