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Visual methods in researching language practices and language learning – looking at, seeing and designing language

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Abstract

The changing ways of using language and various understandings of what *language* is have consequences for the way we research language practices and language learning. When engaging in social contact, people use diverse and complex forms, modes and varieties of language to communicate and, moreover, these resources often include icons, images, and other semiotic ways of meaning making. Visuality thus has a natural position in people's language practices. In this chapter, we discuss how visual methods have been adopted and used as a methodological tool in researching language practices and language learning. With this focus, attention is geared to the materiality of language, on the one hand, and to the alternative and complementary strategies to study experiences and meaning making of language users and learners, on the other. In presenting the major contributions and work in-progress from this perspective, we focus on discourse ethnographic approaches in the contexts of language learning, multilingualism, and identity negotiations and we have structured our text around the visual research strategies of *looking, seeing and designing*.

Introduction

The changing ways of using language and various understandings of what *language* is have consequences for the way we research language practices and language learning. When engaging in social contact, people use diverse and complex forms, modes and varieties of language to communicate and, moreover, these resources often include icons, images, and other semiotic ways of meaning making. Visuality thus has a natural position in people's language practices. Visual methods have a long tradition in social sciences (for reviews see e.g. Holm, 2008; Prosser and Loxley, 2008; Prosser, 2011), but in the field of language research they are a fairly recent phenomenon. Language researchers have developed visual methods especially towards ethnographic and participatory research strategies and consequently engaged informants as active agents who narrate their personal experiences through visual means. There is now a growing body of research using visual and multimodal research methods to examine practices, discourses and experiences of and around language.

In this chapter, we discuss how visual methods have been adopted and used as a methodological tool in researching language practices and language learning¹. With this focus, attention is geared to the materiality of language, on the one hand, and to the alternative and complementary strategies to study experiences and meaning making of language users and learners, on the other. In presenting the major contributions and work in-progress from this perspective, we focus on discourse ethnographic approaches in the contexts of language learning, multilingualism, and identity negotiations and we have

¹ We limit the scope of this chapter strictly to language research methodology and exclude thus here the wide array of research in the area of computer assisted language learning (CALL) and computer mediated communication (CMC) as well as various kinds of pedagogical developments where visual methods and the media have been widely used. [\(ADD CROSS-REFERENCES HERE: This volume\)](#)

structured our text around the visual research strategies of *looking, seeing² and designing*. First, we will, however, outline early developments in the field.

Developments of visual methods

Early anthropological research, starting from Boas and Malinowski, paved way for the use of images in studying communities and practices. Early research mainly made use of photographs taken by the researchers themselves to document the habits and customs of communities by photographing people, artefacts, events, and so on. The images were used to represent reality, but as Prosser and Loxley (2008, p. 6) say, those who criticized the use of photographs argued that photographs were merely used either as illustrations or as support for ideological statements. Even though images are widely used today, they can still be regarded as too subjective to be considered rigorous research (Holm, 2008).

In language research too, visual methods have been used in several areas. One of the very early areas where images have had a prominent position is semiotics. Pioneers in developing the analysis of images and in creating a grammar of visual images are Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Scollon and Scollon (2004) have developed the study of our semiotic environment in terms of discourse, agency and practice (i.e. nexus analysis) emphasizing the materiality of the environment and calling this approach *geosemiotics*. This paved way for research on another area of language studies, namely the study of linguistic landscapes (e.g., Backhaus, 2006; Shohamy and Gorter 2009). In examining linguistic landscape, visual methods, mainly photographing, are used to document the signs and their placement.

Another area in language studies where visual methods have been applied is ethnographic research on language practices and language learning. Visual methods have been used for example in studying literacy practices, language identities, and multilingualism. The earliest studies where photographs were particularly used can be found in the research area of New Literacy Studies by the Lancaster group (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton, 2000; Hodge and Jones, 2000). These studies were interested in exploring and interpreting people's everyday literacy practices. Their primary methodological framework was ethnography, within which they reintroduced the use of photographs to document the textual environments people live in and the literacy practices they engage in. More recent ethnographic research where visual methods have had a prominent role includes research on multilingual practices of young children in an indigenous language context (Pietikäinen, 2012; Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2013), young people's language practices (Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008), multilingual language repertoires (Busch, 2010), and language portraits (Farmer and Prasad, 2014).

In studying language identities, visual methods, including photos but also material objects such as cultural or family artefacts, have been used to evoke people's memories and relations to language in their life histories (e.g., Galasinski and Galasinska, 2005; Karjalainen, 2012). Photographs have been prominent in these studies, but also drawings have been used in researching the complexities of multilingualism and language learning. With children in particular, drawing has proven to be a plausible way of accessing complex and abstract issues to complement the more traditional methods of data collection, such as

² Berger (1972) used a similar metaphor in his book *Ways of Seeing* and Prosser (2011) also used the word *seeing* in his article, "Visual methodology: Toward a more seeing research".

interviewing. In a pioneering work by Krumm (2001), a method called language portraits was developed to explore individual's language biographies in changing environments including migration, mobility, and multilingualism. This method, utilizing embodied visualization of language repertoires, has been further developed by scholars such as Busch in her studies on language repertoires at school (Busch, 2010) as well as in research on language and mobility (Farmer and Prasad, 2014) and endangered languages as a part of developing multilingual repertoires (Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2014). Drawings have also been applied in the context of language learning. For example, Pietikäinen et al. (2008) used drawings to study children's multilingualism, Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta (2008) investigated young Finn's relationship to English in their everyday practices through visualizations, and Iddings et al. (2005) as well as Kalaja et al. (2013) asked EFL learners to draw self-portraits to trace the development of learner identities.

Another way of looking at visual methods in studying language practices and language learning is to examine how the visual material is employed as research data. The uses can be divided into four different approaches. All of these could be called participatory, as in all of them the participants of the research are in a central role and are engaged in the research process in a special way with the aim of empowerment, for example. The first of these is to use photographs (or other visual material or cultural artefacts) to elicitate other kind of data (e.g., verbal protocols, narratives) from research participants (e.g., Galasiński and Galasińska, 2005; Karjalainen, 2012). The second way is to ask the participants to take photographs of the object of research and thus to produce data (Farmer, 2012; Hodge and Jones, 2000; Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008; Pietikäinen, 2012). The third one is similar to the second one in that the participants create data, but instead of taking photographs they create drawings or other visual images (Farmer, 2012; Iddings et al., 2005; Kalaja et al., 2013; Pietikäinen, 2008; Pietikäinen et al., 2008). Finally, the visual material may be used to document the research site and facilitate access to the field (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Hodge and Jones, 2000). Visual material may become data as the research project develops. For example, Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta (2013, 2014) and Pitkänen-Huhta and Pietikäinen (2014) studied evolving multilingual practices in an indigenous language medium classroom. As a set of various other activities utilising visual methods (e.g., Pietikäinen 2012), the children also created multimodal picture books, which is an approach employed in various multilingual contexts (e.g., Busch, 2010; Farmer, 2012). In this study, the creation of the books had multiple functions. It was a school task for the children, it was part of ethnographic study of the researchers, and it was a community effort in the process of language revitalization.

In the following, we will present current major discourse ethnographic work in the area of language research through three different ways of conceptualizing the research strategies adopted in the studies.

Significant current trends

Our focus here is on discourse ethnographic approaches in the contexts of language learning, multilingualism, and identity negotiations. This reflects both our own position and experiences as well as a more general tendency in applying visual methods in research on language practices and language learning. In the following, we have structured our text around visual and mental processes of *looking, seeing and designing*. We chose these metaphors to capture some aspects of the various visual research strategies used in language research and to discuss typical ways of working with research participants, data, analysis, and

findings as well as their pros and cons. While these three processes are overlapping and intertwined, for the purposes of this article, they are apt in bringing forth different, even though interrelated and complementary aspects of visualising language: the relationship between language and language user/learner; between the data under scrutiny and the analysis of that data; and between the researcher and the researched. In addition, by using expressions reflecting an on-going process rather than a state depicted by nominals, we aim to highlight two important starting points in using visual research strategies in language research: language – be it understood as textual, visual, verbal, material, or embodied – is seen as social action and language user as a social agent (Fairclough, 1992; Scollon and Scollon, 2004). In addition, using visual methods in language research raises questions of knowledge production and positions of “knowing,” as they foreground questions of co-construction of knowledge and collaborative researching and break the traditional categories and understandings of data, data collection and data analysis. The three processes also capture the expansion of the role of participation in researching language visually: they form a continuum from researching somebody (*looking at language*) to researching with somebody (*seeing language*) to researching by doing something with somebody (*designing language*). In connection with each of these three processes we will also address some challenges that researchers face in using visual methods.

Looking at language



Fig. 1: Photograph of music cds

The young people participating in this discourse ethnographic project were asked to take photographs of places, objects or activities where English played some kind of role. Taking photographs seemed to be a very natural activity for the young and they also produced very similar sets of photographs. Music played an important role for all of them: they listened to English music constantly and both the music and the lyrics were important to them. They felt pride that they could understand the lyrics and through music they felt to be part of the international imagined community of young people.

This photo illustrates the visual research strategy of *looking at language* employed to study young Finns' uses of English in their everyday activities. The aim of the participant taken photographs was to gain a window into the everyday lives of the young. Looking as a process of examining language practices turns our attention to the material object, in this case the picture, that captures our gaze. Looking at this visualisation of English music provides a reflection point, both for the photographer him/herself as well as us viewers, to examine

experiences related to English: what role does the language play in my everyday activities, where does it connect to and how do I relate to it? The process of looking is further mediated by the use of camera: the lens of the camera chooses and frames one particular moment in time, and transforms it as an object, to be placed alongside textual information for others to view in a new context (such as this chapter). As such the photo can be understood as a complex, culturally situated nexus of circulating discourses of languages in our lives, learning to cope with foreign languages, youth cultures, internationalization and globalization of popular culture as well as personal experiences and emotions of the photographers (cf. Scollon and Scollon, 2004). These components of the photograph can be traced with the help of other methods, such as by interviewing the photographer and by mapping out circulating discourses across other photos or other data (cf. Cappello, 2005; Pietikäinen, 2012). The interpretation of the significance and meaning of the photo is co-constructed in dialogue with the producer and the viewer and in dialogues with other research participants and other sources of data as well as with the conceptual frameworks in use. Thus the photograph evokes complex relationships between the people involved as well as between personal experiences and social practices and discourses.

The value of photography in language research lies in its potential to make visible the experiences and practices related to language and to bypass some constraints related to, for example, language skills and boundaries between languages. It has the potential to provide new understandings and make visible the processes of learning and teaching, co-constructions of knowledge, language ideologies as well as engage in critical reflections and discussions. The challenges may be related to more practical sides of photographing: equipment, costs, copyright, and ethics. Another type of a challenge is linked to the multiple ways of looking at and interpreting the image and thereby language. The photograph itself tells one story and it can be interpreted differently by the producer and the viewer (researcher). This may be problematic from the point of view of data analysis, but it also points to the complexity of issues related to language practices and to the concepts around language practices and language learning. The problem may be overcome through dialogue with other type of data, such as interviews.

In addition to exploring how language practices and learning look alike, as illustrated above, another way of utilizing visual methods in language research attempts to tap in how people make sense of their changing language environments. In this context, visual methods can be one way of examining how language can be seen – both literally and metaphorically, and we turn to look at this next.

Seeing language



Fig. 2: Learner portrait

This drawing was created in the context of university studies. First year students majoring or minoring in English (as a foreign language) were asked to draw themselves as learners of EFL. This was done as coursework and a permission was asked to use the drawings as research data. The students were provided with an A4 sized framed sheet of paper with the title SELF-PORTRAIT and with an added caption saying This is what look like as an EFL learner. (Kalaja et al., 2013).³

The drawing exemplifies the visual research strategy of *seeing language*. In this context, seeing has a double meaning: first, it refers to the perception of something with your eyes. This underlines the physical aspects of this process: it is something that we do with one of our senses, namely the sight. Secondly, it also refers to becoming aware of something as a result of observing something by using your eye. In this sense seeing refers to the processes of reflection, understanding and interpretation (cf. I see what you mean). This brings in the cognitive aspect of seeing. Together seeing is then both a physical (perception) and cognitive (awareness, understanding) process. The research strategy of *seeing language* can thus be used to connect the physical world or material artefact and the process of understanding.

The research strategy of *seeing language* has been applied in various ways, but within the field of language research typically with working around drawings. One type of application can be called user or learner-centered drawings, where the drawings are used to get insight into the beliefs, motivations and experiences related to language, language learning and multilingualism as experienced and visualised by the language user. For example, Kalaja et al. (2013) used language portraits as a way to tap in the beliefs around foreign language learning. Similar work has been done by Busch (2010), Farmer (2012), Pietikäinen et al. (2008), and Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta (2014) to examine multilingual practices in indigenous language revitalisation contexts.

Another type of application of the drawings can be named spatio-temporal visualisations. The drawings are used to map the trajectories of usage of particular languages

³ We wish to thank you Paula Kalaja, Riikka Alanen and Hannele Dufva for giving us permission to use their data as an example of *seeing language*.

in terms of time and context, including activities and interlocutors. One example of this is a visual language diary, in the form of a clock. In the instructions, the informants are asked to mark down in the clock when and with whom they have used different languages (Satchwell, 2005). Another example is the map of language environment: the informant is asked to map various activities s/he is engaged with for example during one day or in a particular role (as a parent, as a teacher, etc.) and to mark down the languages s/he uses in these contexts (cf. Pietikäinen, 2008). These kinds of visualisations help to understand the affordances and constraints relating to particular languages.

Drawings as a method for seeing language are flexible and practical in the sense that they do not require access to specific technology or related skills, only the traditional means of pen and paper are sufficient. A challenge may, however, be that the participants may feel intimidated by the task if they feel they do not have the necessary artistic skills of drawing. School experiences of being “a good or bad drawer” may be evoked when facing a task like this later in life. Therefore it is very important that the researchers emphasize that artistic skills play no role and that any kinds of visual means can be used.

As with photographs, the challenges with drawings are related to the interpretation and analysis of them as data. Research has approached analysis in various ways depending on the theoretical framework and the conceptualizations of language. Drawings have been considered visual discourses (Pietikäinen, 2012) and analysed as a nexus of complex web of discourses surrounding the image. Another way of approaching analysis is to see images as visual narratives (Besser and Chik, 2014; Kalaja et al, 2013; Nikula and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2008) or as multimedia narratives (Menezes, 2008; Nelson, 2006). Drawings have been also analysed semiotically as an image analysis or viewed as part of multimodal literacy practices (Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2013).

We have so far moved from looking at language practices and language learning to understanding and interpreting practices and learning. Next we will turn to the research strategy of designing language and collaborative research.

Designing language



Fig. 3: Multilingual picture books

As a part of a larger, critical discourse ethnographic research on multilingualism in

indigenous Sámi communities, a set of participatory activities were designed and carried out together with the teachers and the pupils taking part in Sámi medium education. One of these was a literacy event in which multilingual Sámi primary-school children worked on a school task of designing their own multimodal, multilingual picture books⁴. The books were printed and circulated across other Sámi medium classrooms as supplementary reading material. The authors enjoyed the project, finding new connections and functions of multilingual and multimodal resources (Pitkänen-Huhta and Pietikäinen, 2014).

As a research strategy, *designing language* refers not only to the planning, but also making decisions and acting accordingly to accomplish a goal, which usually takes a material form. Importantly for language research, this strategy foregrounds the agency of the participants and the collaborative activities among all participants, the researcher included. The participants become active agents who work on the resources available to them, be they material, linguistic or visual, to produce a material artefact. This strategy extends and moves beyond the visual practices in that it connects the visual material to the wider practices of production and circulation of material artefacts.

This multisided process of designing and producing the material artefact, such as the book above, can be used as a powerful methodological tool in language research. Designing a material artefact is embedded in the particular conditions of production and one aspect of it is related to language ideologies. For example, the production of the little book above in the multilingual indigenous language environment involved complex and multi-layered negotiations of which languages to include, how to handle the issues of standard writing, and the hierarchies and values attached to particular languages. Another aspect of using the research strategy of designing language is that it foregrounds the methods of collaborative research. The traditional roles and positions of the researcher and researched are blurred as the informants become a more integral part of the research process and the research team. The process turns into researching by doing and doing in collaboration – not only between the researchers and informants but also by extending the collaboration to the community and other stakeholders.

In this sense, this kind of collaborative project captures two shifts in language research at the same time: the material turn and researching by doing. Within language research, one major terrain where language designing has been used is in the production of teaching/learning or multilingual materials, especially in a context where they are scarce (cf. Busch 2010; Pietikäinen and Pitkänen-Huhta, 2014). The collaborative project may also involve the production of other material products besides books. For example, Farmer (2012) used the making of a quilt as a tool for making connections between social mobility and physical mobility in the context of the changing multilingual classroom. We can also see glimpses of these kinds of collaborative projects involving language issues and designing a product in various campaigns involving such as designing t-shirts or mittens (<http://www.discoursehub.fi/>).

The research strategy of designing language serves multiple functions. First of all, it helps in valorizing language resources that might otherwise remain hidden. In the tasks described above, the participants were given fairly free hands to create the material artefact. As opposed to a purely teacher or researcher imposed task, this freedom encouraged the

⁴ We wish to thank Brigitta Busch for her generous help in this subproject and Leena Huss for collaboration in designing the data collection in Sámiland. Our warmest thanks go to the pupils, teachers, and parents.

participants to explore and see the various language resources in their environment. Secondly, designing facilitates the use of various linguistic and other semiotic resources to create artefacts that are personally meaningful and which thus empower the participants in their use and appropriation of all available resources. Thirdly, these kinds of tasks increase the users' multilingual awareness and finally, they help in the production of teaching materials that are bottom-up and thus typically user friendly.

Future directions

We have here outlined research that has made use of photographs, drawings and material artefacts and discuss the ways in which they can be used to learn more about language practices and learning. What we have ignored here, but anticipate that will become more salient in language research, too, is the wealth of visual means making use of moving images and shared social media. You-tube clips of language related comedies, rap-performances and makeovers of popular hits or Facebook accounts created for collaborative learning (teach-your-self X languages), gaming and social networking are examples of the ways in which new kind of multimodal communication is used in creative ways to promote language learning, multilingual awareness, and a sense of language community and identity (cf. Blake, 2013; Pietikäinen and Dufva, 2014). The emerging ways of using language and photo in a context of social media continue to blur the boundaries between visual/textual, producer/user, private/public and create new genres and practices for language use, learning and identity work (Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Senft, 2013). The rapidly changing world of visual culture – with innovative ways of using languages, visualities and technologies – offers novel and crucial sites for examining language and emerging language practices. Researchers should follow the developments closely and actively engage in creating new ways of employing visual methods.

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