Treading Semiotic Paths in Multilingual Literacy Learning: Challenging Ideological Conceptualizations of Language and Literacy in Education

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Abstract Informed by a view of language and literacy learning as social semiosis, the chapter argues that there is a need for a deconstruction of ideological conceptualizations of language and literacy and a reconceptualization of the relationship between language and literacy that reflect the complexity of children's linguistic and semiotic repertoires and their engagement in language and literacy as meaning making. The findings from *Signs of Language*, which frames this article, have shown that, when given the opportunity, multilingual students find and create paths across languages and modes in their literacy practices and in learning to read and write in a language new to them. However, these findings have also demonstrated that multilingual students' perceptions of their own proficiency and future opportunities are strongly influenced by the growing tendency to use literacy skills to regulate education through outcome metrics and the growing perception of literacy as a set of measurable skills that can only be measured in a specific language. Based on these findings, this chapter calls for greater research attention to be devoted to emic perspectives that transcend universalistic conceptions of literacy as well as fragmented understandings of semiotic meaning making.

Keywords Social semiotics · Meaning making · Linguistically diverse classrooms · Models of multilingualism · Perceived proficiency

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1 'The Child Normally Understands the Spoken Language'

'What is new and difficult for the novice reader is the decoding of the written language. "What does it say?", the child asks. That's the problem. And the problem is solved if the text is read aloud for the child. The child, as we know, normally understands the spoken language' (Elbro 2014, p. 59, my translation).

'Det nye og svære for begynderlæseren er afkodningen af skriften. "Hvad står dér?" spørger barnet. Det er problemet. Og problemet er løst for barnet, hvis det får teksten læst op. Det talte sprog forstår barnet jo normalt' (The original text in Danish)

The quotation above is from the book 'Reading and reading difficulties', which is widely used in teacher education as an introduction for student teachers on how to teach children to read. According to the description on its website, the book deals with topics such as 'principles of written Danish, reading processes, methods of reading instruction, and reading difficulties'.

The quotation represents a certain understanding of reading (Østergaard 2013) and presents it as though it were commonsense. In the original Danish quotation, this common-sensibility is signaled in the general tone and in the little adverb 'jo', which, in Danish, is used to indicate that something is familiar or obvious and that one assumes that the receiver of the message shares the epistemic stance taken (Mortensen 2012). However, many presuppositions are embedded in this representation of reading. First, this representation implies that children's entry into the written language is something that begins at school start. Second, it implies that written language is understood as a direct representation of the spoken language – and that learning to read is essentially synonymous with decoding (in this case, sounding out words). The learning process is presented as a linear process: first decoding and then comprehension, which is something that is taken for granted. Third, this representation entails that learning the principles of the written language is tied to the alphabetic script system – and, in this case, to a specific Danish version of it; consequently, it is considered to be *un*-normal *not* to understand spoken Danish.

In this way, language and literacy become ideologically integrated in a way that reduces literacy acquisition to a question of adding signs to a language that the student is expected to know. As such, the fact that this is not the case for all children is either neglected or viewed as a deviation from the norm rather than a common condition for many children. This perception of literacy may have serious consequences for students who do not fit into this monolingual construction of the normal child, as it leads to a perception of the multilingual child who does not progress along the expected path as – in Anderson-Levitt's (1996) words – falling behind schedule. The quotation represents a common ideological and institutionalized conception of literacy learning and of the way language and literacy are interwoven in this process. As such, it also forms part of the normative landscape that children navigate in school and through which they interpret what is currently expected of them as well as their proficiency and future opportunities (Laursen 2019).

In this chapter, I argue for a shift in the conception of literacy. I believe we should move beyond viewing literacy as a direct representation of the spoken language and

as linked to a specific spoken language that one is supposed to master. Instead of thinking in national based norms and boundaries, we need to open for new research agendas to study meaning making processes and practices across languages and modalities, which also involves children's investment in learning the language primarily used in the learning environment.

2   The Study *Signs of Language* and the Educational Context

This chapter is built on previous and new analyses from the study *Signs of Language* (to which I will return in more detail). The study has followed students in five different classrooms since they began school and focuses on their meaning making processes and practices in relation to literacy. The study is an ongoing ten-year collaborative study that examines multilingual children's literacy acquisition by paying attention to their conceptions and explorations of written language as a meaning-making tool. It takes place in five linguistically diverse classroom settings in Denmark. The study started in August 2008, when the children began in year one (age 5–6), and it will continue until 2018, when the children will be in year ten (age 15–16). Most of the children who are officially labeled as 'bilingual' were born and raised in Denmark. In primary and lower secondary school, these bilingual students follow the mainstream curriculum but, in some cases, they receive supplementary teaching in 'Danish as a second language' if deemed necessary and accepted by the school principal. However, as a result of increased migration, the number of newly arrived students with a non-Danish background has risen in recent years. In most cases, these students are provided with some basic instruction in Danish in a reception class or through teaching in teams or individual instruction before enrollment in the mainstream classroom.

Like in many other Western European countries, in Danish educational policy, there is a move towards mainstreaming with a minimum of second language support (Mohan et al. 2001) and a strong emphasis on 'Danishness' in terms of cultural and linguistic affiliation. At the same time, there is a growing tendency to use literacy skills to regulate education through outcome metrics and international comparisons of test scores. This intensified regulation is evidenced, for example, in the Danish national test program, which includes a reading test in years three, five, seven and nine and in the PISA measurement, which is an international survey that tests the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in a number of countries worldwide (OECD 2018). Within the PISA framework, literacy is understood as a skill or a competence held by the individual that can be divided into a number of specific subskills in a given language and in a given written language, thus conceptualized as a set of measurable skills, which are measured in a specific language. Students who are not considered native speakers are measured against monolingual students. It is hardly surprising that such comparisons of monolingual and bilingual students' literacy skills place the bilingual students in a deficit position, which becomes evident in the test scores, and which is regularly exposed in the media (Holm 2017;

Holm and Laursen 2011). Consequently, these students have been identified as a particular risk group that requires special attention and, for this reason, a so-called 'PISA ethnic' measurement is conducted in schools with a high percentage of bilingual children. As the focus on accountability and test performances increases, there is also a heightened political pressure on migrant families to ensure that their children learn Danish before school start and, since 2004, it has been compulsory for bilingual children who either do not attend a day-care center or who do attend a day-care center but is considered in need of language support to participate in language stimulation training.

The study *Signs of Language* is situated in schools with a significant number of students with diverse language backgrounds. Data are collected partly through observations and interventions in the classrooms with the aim of exploring the possibilities of pedagogical transformations of the literacy practices in these classrooms. In each classroom, teachers and research assistants collaborate to create literacy learning opportunities taking into consideration the linguistic diversity and the students' language learning needs. Moreover, the data collection comprises interviews and different researcher generated activities, in which all children take part in several different meaning-making processes that involve various visual and verbal representations of their language and literacy practices. Some of the activities include interactions with different linguistic resources. In other activities, the children interact in varying ways with texts in Danish, which is the language of instruction in these classrooms. Among other things, the study allows us to follow the children across a range of different contexts to acquire closer insights into the interaction between the children's meaning making processes and the semiosized spaces around them. As will be shown in the next sections, this also includes children's personal and interpersonal construction of proficiency as language and literacy users.

3   Is it Normal to Understand Danish? The Dialogical Construction of Proficiency

One of the above researcher-generated activities was inspired by the language-teaching task 'dictogloss', which was introduced by Wajnryb (1990) as an interactive approach to teaching grammar. The activity was carried out in year five when the students were 10–11 years old. First, a short text in Danish was read aloud three times to a group of three children while they took notes. Then the children worked together to summarize the text without looking at the original text. The text was a short, slightly revised, newspaper article about a python; it described how the python had got caught on an aircraft wing and how the flabbergasted passengers had watched the snake struggle with strong winds and minus-degree temperatures throughout the two-hour flight and how, unfortunately, the snake died before the plane reached its destination. The original aim of this activity was to give the

children the opportunity to talk about the content and the language of the article and to learn about their reading strategies during their reconstruction. However, it was actually a different observation that ended up being the most insightful; namely, that several of the 'bilingual students' had difficulties understanding the text and obviously felt so ashamed that they tried to conceal their lack of understanding. They looked down, they looked embarrassed, and some of them tried to catch a glimpse of the others' notes or to install an unofficial agenda. Only a few of the children explicitly said that they found the text difficult to understand. This showed very clearly that, in linguistically diverse classrooms such as those in this study, we cannot assume that the children will understand a text if it is only read aloud, just as we cannot assume that they will draw attention to a potential lack of understanding. This finding made us aware that the students seemed to have accepted the monolingual premise that it is 'normal to understand Danish' and that they seemed to feel embarrassed when they were unable to comprehend what they heard.

Having become aware of this, in the research group, we began to consider how this might influence what goes on in the classroom, where students, in parallel with the academic work, are also involved in identity processes through which they position themselves socially in relation to the other children in their class as well as their teachers and in decoding and interpreting the micro-politics of classroom interaction (Bloome and Willett 1991; Laursen and Fabrin 2013). In every classroom, there are various interactional procedures that are considered appropriate in a given situation, and students are usually careful to act according to – or at least to *look as though* they are acting according to – these procedures. In the light of these findings from the dictogloss activity, the participation patterns of one child – Halim – was examined through pre-recorded videos of classroom lessons (Laursen 2016). In the dictogloss activity, Halim was one of the students who showed several signs of not understanding the text that was read aloud and of consequently feeling ashamed. In the classroom, Halim often displayed a general self-restraint that was visible partly through a lesser degree of hand-raising than we generally found in relation to the other children in the class, and partly through different ways of making himself unavailable for selection in the classroom conversation. Different conversation analytical studies of the organization of classroom interaction have shown how turn allocation is something that is negotiated between teachers and students rather than something the teacher governs alone. For example, in a detailed study of hand-raising in classroom interaction, Sahlström (1999) has demonstrated how raising the hand serves as a signal of accessibility in different ways, and Mortensen (2008) has shown how gaze is systematically used to display willingness or unwillingness to be selected as a speaker. When the student is given a turn, it usually occurs after eye contact between the teacher and the student, who has already made him- or herself available for selection by predicting the transition periods in which the turn-allocation will take place and gazing towards the teacher. Our classroom data did not allow a systematic micro-analysis of Halim's participation patterns (as the video camera was not necessarily directed towards him), but, in addition to the lesser degree of hand-raising, it was notable how Halim often seems to make himself unavailable by avoiding looking at the teacher during whole-class interactions and

by physically locating himself behind the other students during activities that involve standing around the teacher somewhere in the classroom. It is not possible to determine the exact motivation behind Halim's behaviour, but, judging from a range of situations, there seems to be a tension between Halim's desire to get involved in the learning activities (which he might consider linguistically risky) and his desire to engage in what Rymes and Pahl (2001) have called 'passing' as knowing.

In a study of the production of proficiency in linguistically diverse schools, Martin-Beltrán (2010) developed the concept *perceived proficiency* to make visible the co-constructed nature of language competence and its potential effects on language learning possibilities. Based on a close examination of classroom discourse and positioning practices on a personal, interpersonal and institutional level, Martin-Beltrán's analysis showed how perceived proficiency was dialogically constructed, socially situated and shifted in the classroom. It also illustrated how the perceptions of proficiency often influenced children's possibilities for participation by creating unfavorable constraints. If we accept the monolingual premise that it is 'normal to understand Danish', the risk is that, for Halim and other students like him, a desire to blend in as an 'ordinary student' can take center stage to such an extent that it actually obstructs learning. In the words of Rymes and Pahl (2001, p. 281), 'becoming fluent in certain social routines can actually interfere with classroom learning. Knowing how to look *as if* one understands lesson content and skills (e.g. knowing how to read English) can hinder *knowing* such things'.

4   The Construction of Proficiency and Future Possibilities: Three Voices

In Halim's case, the construction of proficiency on the interpersonal level seemed to largely involve avoiding attracting attention in situations that might be face-threatening. Even though all the participating classroom teachers in the study are keen to acknowledge and support linguistic diversity, on the institutional level, the societal discourses that define what counts as academic success are still mirrored in testing procedures and other regulative practices and thus presumably contribute to shaping the ways students such as Halim perceive themselves and their proficiency.

In other cases, the children's ongoing constructions of their perceived proficiency are manifest and clearly articulated and negotiated. For example, it is not unusual to hear the newly arrived students characterize themselves as poor readers – even though they may have learnt to read in one or more languages other than Danish – or to hear them explicitly refer to their own literacy skills as inadequate, sometimes without distinguishing between literacy proficiency and mastery of the Danish language and sometimes expressing concerns about a lack of such distinction in the testing practices. Neither is it unusual to hear them reflect on their own competences

with regard to how it might influence them when they leave school. The following examples are from a researcher-generated activity in which students in year seven were asked to write a portrait of themselves as readers, which was then followed by a conversation between the research assistant (RA) and a group of students. The first two excerpts come from a follow-up conversation in which Mi Mi (a student with a Burmese language background, who joined the mainstream classroom in year six after having spent approximately 2 years in a reception class) takes part with two Danish-speaking classmates. As part of the conversation, the students are encouraged to reflect on how this portrait might change when they get older. One of the students, Sasha, mentions that finishing school is only a few of years away. A couple of minutes later, the research assistant continues by asking the three students if they have considered what they would like to do when they leave school:

Sasha: No. I don't know what I want to do.
          (Nej. Jeg ved ikke hvad jeg vil)
RA: No. What about you, Mi Mi?
          (Nej. Hvad med dig Mi Mi?)
Mi Mi: I don't know
          (Det ved jeg ikke)
RA: No
          (Nej)
Mi Mi: I get kind of a little nervous
          (Jeg bliver sådan lidt nervøs)
RA: A little nervous about it?
          (Lidt nervøs ved det?)
Mi Mi: Yes
          (Ja)
RA: Yes. Why does one get nervous about it?
          (Ja. Hvorfor bliver man nervøs ved det?)
Mi Mi: I'm not so good at like spelling and reading. Can I learn all that in three years? Or can I move on with or-
          (Jeg er ikke så god til at sådan stave og læse. Med tre år kan jeg lære alt det? Eller skal jeg med videre eller-)
RA: Yes, yes
          (Ja, ja)
Mi Mi: It's just-
          (Det er bare-)
RA: So it's a big task ahead of you. To continue to get better at reading and writing
          (Så det er en stor opgave, der ligger foran dig. Det der med at blive ved med at blive bedre til at læse og skrive)
Mi MI: Yes or just to get to- just to get into, year 10
          (Ja eller bare stå- bare bestå til, helt til niende klasse)

RA: Yes, yes
         (Ja, ja)
Mi Mi: And that's crazy to think about
         (Og det er vildt at tænke over)

Extract 1 'I get kind of a little nervous'

In this excerpt, Mi Mi describes herself as being 'not so good at like spelling and reading' and displays her nervousness about not being able to meet the expectations in year ten and not being able to progress with the others ('komme med videre'). Thus, the discussion about their thoughts on the future seems to trigger Mi Mi's worry about her own future. She feels a time pressure to reach the required level to even pass the exams. In that way, she positions herself as someone who is more or less doomed to fail based on her literacy skills in Danish.

A couple of minutes before the dialogue presented in the above quotation, the research assistant had asked the children about their experiences with national tests. After Sasha explains that she sometimes finds the tests difficult and sometimes manageable, Mi Mi repeats part of the answer that Sasha gave ('sometimes it is difficult') and continues to explain that she cannot read texts.

Mi Mi: Yes. Sometimes it's difficult. I can't read (xxx) texts
         (Ja, nogle gange er det svært. Jeg kan ikke læse (xxx) tekster)
RA: No, why?
         (Nej, hvorfor?)
Mi Mi: It's very difficult to understand, but the exercise is easy to do, but they
         do it like that with texts and mixed together. This I think is the most
         difficult thing to think about
         *(Det er mest svært at forstå, men opgaven er nem at lave, men de gør
         de sådan med tekster og blandet sammen. Det synes jeg er mest svært
         at tænke over)*

Extract 2 'Sometimes it's difficult'

Whereas Mi Mi in the first excerpt did not differentiate between herself as a second language user and her reading and spelling competence, in this excerpt, she makes a distinction between exercises that are easy to do but hard to understand, thus positioning herself as a student who has no problems with the type of test in general but difficulties with the concrete comprehension. She exemplifies this with reference to a specific type of test 'with texts and mixed together'. She is most likely referring to the so-called wordchain exercise, in which three words are written in tandem. The student must identify the three words and draw a line where one word ends, and another begins. These wordchain exercises are developed to measure decoding skills but, if the student is unfamiliar with the words in the chain, it is difficult to demonstrate this decoding ability.

Mi Mi is not the only student to express concerns about her future educational possibilities on the basis of her perceived literacy proficiency. Similar to Mi Mi, Tora (a student with a Hebrew language background, who was enrolled in the same classroom in year six after a couple of years in a reception class) grapples with her educational options for the future. In the excerpt below, the research assistant has asked her which languages she thinks she will need in the future. Prior to this, Tora has said that she would like to be a dermatologist.

RA: And how about you Tora, you are reading both Danish and English now, aren't you?
        (Og hvad med dig Tora, du læser både dansk og engelsk nu eller hvordan?)
Tora: And Hebrew
        (Og hebraisk)
RA: And Hebrew, yes
        (Og hebraisk, ja)
Tora: So I do not know because when I think? I think in Hebrew, so it will be easiest to learn in Hebrew, but-, so, but if I'm going to Israel anyway to learn I could just as well just concentrate on Engl- like learning English, and then I could learn it there because I still have to pay to go to school in Israel, and in England, I think, the United States and England, that, there you learn better because- I don't know. So I hope I can do it in English. At least I know- I believe it will not be in Danish unless I become very good at Danish in the next couple of years.
        (Så jeg ved det ikke fordi at når jeg tænker? jeg tænker på hebraisk, så det bliver nemmeste på- at lære på hebraisk, men-, altså, men hvis jeg skal allerede til Israel, og lære, jeg kunne ligeså godt bare koncentrere mig, på eng- sådan, på at lære engelsk, og så kunne jeg lære det der for jeg skal alligevel betale for skole i Israel, og i England, og jeg tror at det-, USA og England, at, dér, lærer man det bedre fordi at-, jeg ved det ikke. Så jeg håber at jeg kan gøre det på engelsk. Jeg ved i hvert fald- jeg _tror_ i hvert fald ikke det bliver på dansk med mindre jeg bliver _meget god_ til dansk, de næste par år)
RA: So do you do something to keep your-, what could you say, Hebrew reading skills alive and do you still read a lot in Hebrew?
        (Så gør du noget for at holde dine-, hvad skal man sige hebraiske læsefærdigheder i live og, læser du stadigvæk meget på hebraisk?)
Tora: I'm trying but, it's-, not quite, I'm trying, so, when I'm going to read, when I really [want to] learn, I try to find something in Hebrew, the subject we're working on, in Hebrew, because then I can understand it 100%, but I
        (Jeg prøver men, det er-, ikke sådan, jeg prøver altså når jeg skal læse når jeg virkelig [vil] lære det, så prøver jeg at sådan finde et eller andet på hebraisk, det emne vi læser om, på hebraisk, for så kan jeg forstå det sådan 100%, men jeg)

RA: So you use it to complement what you do in class
        (Så du bruger det til at supplere med i forhold til det I laver i klassen)
Tora: Yes, but not really, I do not sit at home and say to myself, now I'm going
        to practice it, because I do not do that
        *(Ja, men- ikke rigtigt altså jeg sidder ikke sådan derhjemme og siger til
        mig selv, nu skal jeg øve mig på det, for det gør jeg ikke)*
RA: No, do you read novels in Hebrew or what?
        (Nej, læser du romaner på hebraisk eller hvordan?)
Tora: Not really, I read more like- *(pauses and smiles crookedly)* well, I know
        it's rather stupid but like magazines and such things
        *(Ikke rigtigt jeg læser mere sådan- (pause, smiler skævt) sådan, jeg ved
        godt det er sådan ret dumt men sådan magasiner og sådan noget)*

Extract 3 'I could just as well just concentrate on English'

Whereas Mi Mi seems to regard Danish as the only possible language for future
education, Tora envisages, albeit hesitantly, herself as an individual with transna-
tional experiences and multilingual competences that offer her more open educa-
tional opportunities. In this excerpt, she seems to have a kind of discussion with
herself as to how to avoid letting her Danish language skills disrupt her educational
aspirations and, with somewhat moral overtones – perhaps ventriloquizing an adult
advice-giving voice – how to maintain her command of Hebrew.

More clearly confident of his own ability to determine his educational direction
is Ayan (a student with a Somali language background also enrolled in the same
class after a period of time in a reception class). In his written portrait of himself as
a reader he writes 'I want to go to HS [high school], UNI AND FINALLY A
LAWYER' ('jeg vil gerne i GYM, UNI, OG TIL SIDST ADVOKAT'), positioning
himself as someone who knows what he wants and how to get it. This position is
emphasized by the capital letters and his use of abbreviations for high school and
university, signaling a kind of insider knowledge, which probably stems from his
elder sisters and brothers. He also writes that he reads a lot when he plays computer
games, though 'well, it's not Danish but English' ('det er godt nok ikke dansk men
engelsk') and in the follow-up conversation he lists all the different languages in
which he can read (English, Arabic, Somali, Danish, German and a little Spanish).
However, his multilingualism also has a price. In the interview, he explains that he
finds national reading tests difficult, because there are many Danish proverbs that he
'obviously doesn't know' ('jo ikke kan'). With the Danish 'jo', he implies that, as a
multilingual student, this understanding of Danish proverbs cannot be expected of
him, and he does not articulate this as a problem that might impede educational
success.

These voices all revolve around how literacy learning and the acquisition of a
new language relate to future opportunities for academic success in the light of the
students' multilingual and translocal experiences. Common to all three students is a
preoccupation with the construction of proficiency and an attention to literacy as

what Miller (1999) calls a 'gateway and/or barrier to success'. But whereas Mi Mi to a large extent seems to have accepted the reasoning behind the ideological linkage between language learning and literacy proficiency and its determining effect on academic success and portrays herself as being 'behind schedule', both Tora and Ayan appear to challenge this causality; Ayan by deconstructing the common-sensibility behind the expectations in the test and refusing to let his lack of knowledge of Danish proverbs interfere with his plans for the future, and Tora by searching for alternatives to studying in Denmark and finding ways to make use of her linguistic resources elsewhere.

5   A Need for a Deconstruction: Models and Multilingualism

If we are to move beyond the ideological integration of language and literacy addressed in the children's narratives above, we need to query existing assumptions about multilingualism and the relationship between second language acquisition and literacy development, which often remains unquestioned.

In Denmark, the introduction of the notion of 'second language' has played – and continues to play – a key role in the deconstruction of the 'taken for granted-ness' of this very prevalent ideological conception of literacy and of the corresponding expectations on children who, in many cases, have been regarded as less intelligent or identified as functional illiterates if they do not measure up to the norm (Holm and Laursen 2011). The term 'second language' (sometimes in English language contexts also called 'additional language') has shed light on the emergent processes and practices that characterize people's ways into new forms of language and literacy instead of seeing these processes and practices as deviations from a national norm that one is supposed to master (see e.g. Kulbrandstad 1998). In doing so, it has helped us move away from a deficit perspective on multilingual students' literacy based on monolingual premises. However, at the same time, a classic understanding of the term 'second language', which might be dichotomously contrasted with 'mother tongue', does not map onto the reality in school and the children's complex language practices. Such a binary orientation might also give the impression that the end point is some kind of 'full' competence in a language, conceived as a stable and easily definable entity and that children's entry into literacy consists of completely language-separated processes.

Literacy education in Denmark has traditionally been characterized by the neglect of linguistic diversity, as witnessed in the introductory quotation. When this neglect is challenged, literacy education usually then adopts a model framed by conventional conceptual distinctions between native speakers and non-native speakers and between mother tongue and second language. Since the 1990s, an influential model in Danish settings has been one originally introduced by Sarah C. Gudschinsky in the 1960s to address literacy teaching in regard to 'the problem of the illiterate monolingual' (1977, p. 65) in Latin America on the basis of a pedagogical principle of going from the unknown to the known. The known was seen as the oral command
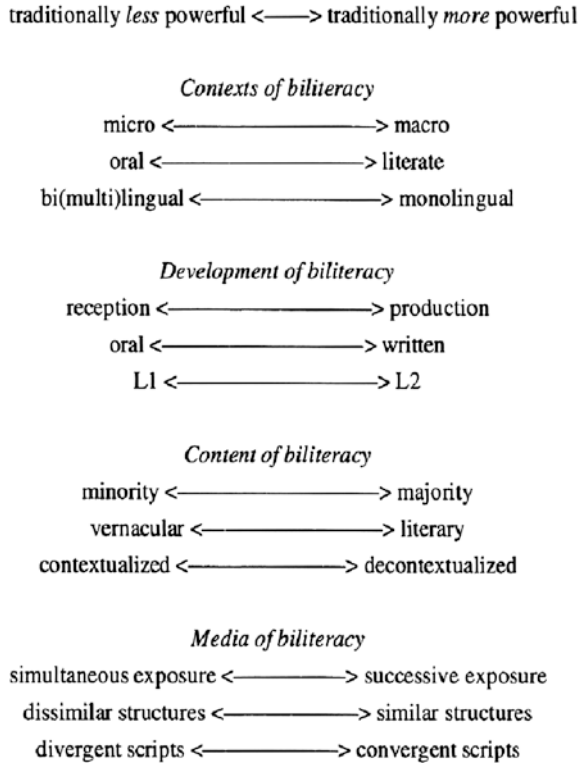
Fig. 1 Biliteracy teaching
(based on Gudschinsky
1977)

kind of control	oral only	oral and written
kind of language indigenous	a. speaks an indigenous language as his native tongue	b. reads and writes (as well as speaks) his native language.
national	c. speaks the national language as a second language	d. reads and writes (as well as speaks) the national language as a second language

of an 'indigenous language' and the unknown as both literacy in general and as the oral skills linked to 'the national language'.

The overall point of this model is that it is not possible to move directly from A to D, but that literacy teaching has to be organized so that the way towards D goes through either B or C. Even though Gudschinsky's model is now seldom directly referred to, the underlying logic is still viable in educational discourses in Denmark as a counterbalance to the universalistic thinking implied in the introductory quotation (Fig. 1).

However, both the universalistic thinking implied in the introductory quotation and Gudschinsky's model are based on a sharp distinction between oral and written language and grounded in a monolingual ideology that link people to specific languages, which, in turn, are linked to specific nation states or domains such as home versus school. The sequential and unidirectional logic embedded in Gudschinsky's model has been problematized by several scholars (see e.g. Garcia, Bartlett and Kleifgen 2006), some of whom have suggested other models which they believe better capture the complexity involved in the learning and teaching of biliteracy when designing language curricula. One such very powerful model is Hornberger's 'The continua of biliteracy', which proposes 12 intersecting continua organized in four groups in order to 'demonstrate the multiple and complex interrelationships between bilingualism and biliteracy and the importance of the contexts, media, and content through which biliteracy develops' (2004, p. 156). Each continuum is marked by two endpoints, one of which represents something more powerful and the other something less powerful (Fig. 2).

However, a number of questions arise in relation to this model. Firstly, we could ask whether such a model actually eliminates – or whether it maintains – the binary thinking it claims to renounce. In 'The Oxford Dictionary of English', a continuum is defined as '[a] continuous sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extremes are quite distinct'. So, even in a continuum, the endpoints are still considered to be distinctly different. Secondly, we

traditionally *less* powerful <———> traditionally *more* powerful

Contexts of biliteracy

micro <———————————> macro

oral <———————————> literate

bi(multi)lingual <———————————> monolingual

Development of biliteracy

reception <———————————> production

oral <———————————> written

L1 <———————————> L2

Content of biliteracy

minority <———————————> majority

vernacular <———————————> literary

contextualized <———————————> decontextualized

Media of biliteracy

simultaneous exposure <———————> successive exposure

dissimilar structures <———————> similar structures

divergent scripts <———————> convergent scripts

Fig. 2 The Continua of Bilingualism (Hornberger 2004) (https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1008&context=gse_pubs)

could ask about the elements in the continuous sequence. Which elements are they and what constitutes the extremes? For example, what are the elements in the continuum that has bi(multi)lingual and monolingual and, respectively, the oral and written as its extremes? Thirdly, with reference to Street (2003), we could ask a related question about whether the different components of the model are on the same analytical level and, if not: 'what planes are they located in and how can they be described and related to each other at the empirical level?' (p. 342). Fourthly, we could ask why it is precisely these – and not other – components that are part of the model; or, as Street formulates it: "is it all just a list of factors that could go on forever?" (p. 342).

When adopting a monolingual perspective on literacy education, either through universalistic views of literacy or through more or less dichotomous models of multilingualism, it is possible to overlook theoretical insights into cross-linguistic practices and processes as well as empirical interest in examining the students' active exploration and interpretations of script based on their multilingual experiences (see e.g. Buckwalter and Lo 2002; Canagarajah 2013; Kenner 2004; Kenner et al. 2004; Laursen 2013; Moll et al. 2001; Reyes 2006; Robertson 2002).

6   Literacy Learning as Social Semiosis

The monolingual construction of reading in the opening quotation not only affects education and learning possibilities but also research, which, in many cases, is expected to accept this line of reasoning and to lead to findings *on how to* get children who have fallen behind to catch up. This chapter builds upon findings from the research study *Signs of language*, which follows another line of thought by adopting a social semiotic stance in examining how children in multilingual settings engage in learning and using language and literacy (Laursen 2013; Laursen and Kolstrup 2017a, b; Laursen and Mogensen 2016a, b). Contrary to the view expressed in the introductory quotation, when taking a social semiotic perspective, language and literacy learning is perceived as an integrated part of an 'entry into semiosis', to use the words of Hodge and Kress (1988). To understand children's literacy learning, we must, Dyson (1991, 99) writes, 'consider written language development against the backdrop of the child's entire symbolic repertoire'. Written language development is not simply an extension of the child's spoken language or another extreme at the opposite end of a continuum; it is also rooted in the child's entire meaning-making practices. This implies that, when thinking about learning to represent, the point of departure should be found in the general understanding of meaning-making that sees the semiotic process as one 'which fuses a meaning with a form to produce a sign' (Kress 2007, p. 16). This can be achieved in different modes of representation, such as speech, writing, and visual representations. It is clear that speech and writing share some semiotic resources. As examples of these resources, Kress mentions lexis and clause type (17). Speech and writing also share the same fundamental 'logic of mode', namely that of 'sequence in time', while drawing is based on a 'logic of space' (23). However, when it comes to the material aspects of speech and writing, there are profound differences. In this regard, Kress points to the semiotic feature 'framing', which in writing is realized 'by punctuation marks, paragraphing, spacing; in speech by intonation contours, by pauses, by rhythmic features; and so on' (19). For the multilingual students, the entry into semiosis also involves different language repertoires 'with many shared grammatical resources but with some internal language-specific differentiation as well' (MacSwan 2017, p. 179) and different writing systems with unique semiotic characteristic as well as shared underlying symbolic principles (Laursen 2013).

Following this line of thought, learning to signify involves an exploration of the similarities between the different modes and the distinctiveness of each mode. When children have access to more than one language and different writing systems, this exploration might also include reflections on similarities and differences between the languages and scripts involved. 'It's like A, B, C in Danish', Amani says when telling the research assistant about the three Arabic letters she wrote when she was six years old and just started school (Daugaard & Ladegaard 2010). Amani's text emanates from a researcher-generated activity, which was conducted in year one shortly after school start. In the activity, which was named 'Write whatever you want', the children were given a blank piece of paper and invited to write

whatever they wanted. The text was used as a data source in itself and as a trigger to elicit conversations between the researcher and a small group of children.

Amani (a girl with an Arabic language background, who was born and raised in Denmark) has written her own name, and she has written the name of the research assistant who initiated the activity – Uffe. She has written the names backwards, going from right to left with all the letters reversed. This might be influenced by the Arabic way of writing or it might just be a relatively typical feature of emergent writing. She has also drawn a star and a broken heart. In addition, she has written some Arabic characters, which she has placed in a frame. Her reflection on the Arabic letters and their equivalents in Danish indicates that her exploration of written language also involves creating paths between languages that she knows. In the writing process, she is examining differences and similarities in ways of doing written language. Amani's observation that the Arabic characters are like A, B, C in Danish might reflect an awareness of the Danish and the Arabic script as being basically comparable entities. Both kinds of script are alphabetical and – in spite of other differences – based on the same general principle that one graphical form or letter symbol represents one speech sound. So, by and large, learning to read and write in Danish and in Arabic is built on the same basic logic in spite of other differences. But, at the same time, the comparison might also be rooted in the fact that these are the first letters in the alphabets represented by different graphic forms, thus building on visual rather than linguistic roots (Dyson 1991) (Fig. 3).

From a social semiotic perspective, children learning to signify are perceived as the *makers* of signs, and as such they make a number of choices on the basis of the information made available, by others or by themselves, in the social setting. Social semiotics emphasizes that individuals do not merely absorb but in fact actively process and transform the information they encounter in their surroundings according to their own interests and their own specific sociocultural background (Kress 1997). At the same time, interpreting and making signs always implies a transformation of the sign-users' subjectivity. As Kramsch (2009) argues, signs do not only carry

Fig. 3 Amani's text. (https://ucc.dk/sites/default/files/tegn_paa_sprog_skrift_og_betydning_i_flersprogede_klasserum_0.pdf)
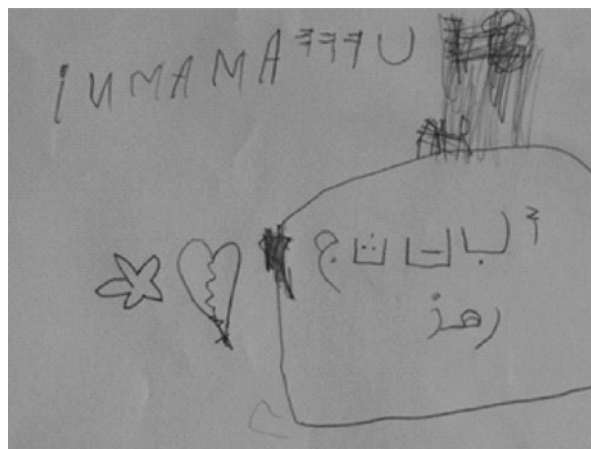
meaning in a representational sense; they also hold a subjective and creative value. By interpreting and using signs, people act upon the world in ways that involve negotiations of their own subjectivity within social relationships. Kramsch also states that we are formed as subjects through the symbols we create and the chains of significations we construct. She thereby highlights the necessity of taking seriously the subjective dimensions of language and literacy learning. Language and literacy are more than an instrumental means of communication, and the engagement with symbols also involves construction of one's self as a signifying subject and an encounter with the symbolic power of language to act upon the world. Seen from such a subjective point of view, Amani's text also illustrates the subjective and symbolic power of language. In her production and discussion of the text, Amani forms and positions herself as a multilingual subject while exploiting and exploring the symbolic possibilities of different signs and of her own subjectivity as a multilingual individual – and perhaps as a girl, unhappy in love, who knows? Amani's example is one of many and may provide us with an insight into how students, at a given time, combine modalities and involve themselves in an active investigation of the ways literacy operates, not only in relation to spoken language but also in relation to other modalities, such as drawing, and to their social experiences. It may also tell us something about how, in many cases, these investigations involve an exploration of similarities and differences between different languages and scripts.

7 Creating Paths across Languages and Modes – Concluding Remarks

If we are to understand how language learners make sense of literacy and embark on finding their ways into literacies in languages new to them, we need a conception of literacy that moves beyond universalistic understandings of literacy and models built on binary notions of language and literacy but that does not ignore the interconnectedness of modes and languages as well as the specific complexities within different modes and languages. With a view of literacy learning as social semiosis, I suggest an expansion of the research agenda to focus more attention to the semiotic paths people actually tread in the process. How do people in fact make use of semiotic resources as they create links between written symbols and meaning while participating in everyday activities and in ongoing dialogic constructions of proficiency?

In the educational system, learning to read and write is probably the factor that is ascribed most significance for students' future academic possibilities. Moreover, there is a growing tendency to use literacy skills to regulate education through outcome metrics and international comparisons of test scores that privilege universalistic, yet linguistically nation-bound, conceptions of literacy and that foreground efficiently measurable dimensions of literacy. This puts multilingual

students in a position in which they easily stand out as less proficient readers and writers.

In the study *Signs of Language,* we have observed multilingual students finding and treading paths across languages and modes in their language and literacy practices as such and in learning to read and write in Danish, moving back and forth between and combining modes and languages when judged relevant for their meaning making and learning. However, we have also realized how strong an influence the focus on accountability and the pressure to master Danish can have on the choices these students make and on the ways they perceive their proficiency and enact this perceived proficiency. Thus, through a focus on students' own interpretations from an emic perspective and on their actual literacy practices and interactions as performed in varying contexts, we have gained insights into the complex social, semiotic and ideological processes involved in multilingual literacy learning. This gives rise to considerations on how to ensure, at a personal and interpersonal as well as at an institutional level, that a lack of distinction between being a second language user and being able to read and write will not create undesirable constraints for students' participation both in a 'here and now' context and in relation to their future academic opportunities. From a dynamic second language learning perspective, we should consider how we can create spaces to encourage students to use and create paths between all their semiotic means, while also working to ensure the best possible conditions for them to expand their meaning making resources in the second language. We also need to ask how we can best provide the students with literacy identity options that do not fall back on universalistic deficit perspectives on second language literacy or fragmented understandings of semiotic meaning.

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