

Tilburg University

## Children's digital literacy practices in unequal South African settings

Lemphane, Polo; Prinsloo, Martin

*Publication date:*  
2013

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Lemphane, P., & Prinsloo, M. (2013). *Children's digital literacy practices in unequal South African settings*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 60).

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 60

### **Children's digital literacy practices in unequal South African settings**

by

*Polo Lemphane<sup>©</sup> & Mastin Prinsloo<sup>©</sup>*

(University of Cape Town)

mastin.prinsloo@uct.ac.za

© June 2013

## Children's digital literacy practices in unequal South African settings

Polo Lemphane and Mastin Prinsloo

University of Cape Town

### 1. Introduction: Policy and practice

Linguistics makes statements about language in general or languages in particular, but these statements are necessarily abstractions from the actuality of language as experienced by its users (Widdowson, 2010, 10).

Questions of language, literacy and pedagogy in African settings are complicated by the particular orientations to these that occur at the level of policy and their divergences with people's experiences of language, literacy and learning. In this paper we examine the language and literacy practices of two groups of children in Cape Town in their home settings as they engage with digital media. We are concerned to ask what can be learnt about language, literacy and learning from such a study under the observed conditions of social inequality and linguistic diversity, in particular as regards notions of 'mother tongue' education, with regard to children growing up in very different home environments, under conditions of multilingualism, linguistic diversity and social inequality.

One of the complications of language policy development and language practice in South Africa is that it has trouble getting away from the lingering effects of colonial/apartheid administration practices with regard to languages and groups of people. Mamdani (1996; 2012) has described the colonial production of tribes in India and Africa – ethnic groups distinguished on language difference, for administrative purposes – as a key strategy of colonial rule, with lasting consequences. Colonial and racial domination in South Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, was grounded in and mitigated through ethnically organized local administrative authorities where language and ethnicity were locked together.<sup>1</sup> 'Indirect

---

<sup>1</sup> Mamdani (2012: 22) asks: "Did tribes exist before colonialism? If by 'tribe' we understand an ethnic group with a common language, the answer is yes. But tribe as an administrative entity, which discriminates in favour of 'natives' against 'non-natives', most certainly did not exist before colonialism. One might equally well ask: did race exist before racism?"

rule' was the name given to this form of colonial governmentality, developed first in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, as part of an attempt to reconstitute the colonial project on a durable basis. Its premises included an association of civilisation with the West and 'custom' and tribal autonomy with the non-West, and it remade the subjectivities of entire populations on the basis that (tribal) groups of people were bonded together by sharing an original and pure ethnic tradition and language under the administrative control of a central tribal authority. In reality, tribes were neighbours and usually spoke languages that were mutually intelligible; their social histories at times were shared, at other times overlapping and tribal authority was seldom as centralised as it became under the colonial project. Errington (2008, 9), in an analysis of colonial linguistics, presents a view that linguists "'read back' into speech a stability of meaning which actually exists only in their descriptions". Assumptions around language, ethnicity and tribal autonomy, shaped by the influence of the wider colonial project, encouraged colonial linguists to ignore the variability and complexity of the language resources which they chose to name as distinct languages that identified groups of people. The linguists' practices echoed those of 19<sup>th</sup> European nationalist movements who constructed regional/linguistic hegemony around the notion of national languages. (See Makoni and Pennycook, 1997; Heller, 2007. Also, Harries, 2007; 2001 for detailed accounts of the work of Swiss missionary linguists in south-east Africa). Apartheid ruling ideology in South Africa drew directly on the premises of indirect rule as regards ethno-linguistic group identities and the distinction between settlers (identified with 'civilisation' as a phenomenon distinct to Europe in its origins) and natives (identified with 'local custom'). Under apartheid ideology, Africans living in South Africa could enjoy political rights in their 'homelands' or 'Bantustans', each designated for an identified tribe or ethnic group with its own language, under the apartheid myth of 'separate but equal'.

## **2. Background**

Approaches to language, literacy and learning in school that call for 'mother tongue education' in South Africa are complicated by the histories and complexities that we point to above. Post-apartheid South Africa has seen substantial movements of people and

---

language resources across localities, between urban and other environments, as well as from elsewhere in Africa. While there remains, for example, a pre-dominance of identified 'Xhosa-speakers' in the Western Cape, in relation to speakers of the other nine designated indigenous languages, there are also substantial numbers of speakers of other languages, while the language of commerce and government remains English, as is the case elsewhere in South Africa. In addition, the language resources used by people in and around Cape Town and designated as isiXhosa diverge from the standard language identified as isiXhosa. Standard isiXhosa continues to be referenced to an idea of indigenous authenticity that is pre-urban, emanating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century linguistic and orthographic work of missionaries at the Lovedale Institute, which was located in what is now called the Eastern Cape. In this light, Blommaert's (2005, 293) comment is relevant, where he argued that named languages (such as English, isiXhosa, Setswana, Sesotho) "belong to the realm of folk ideologies of language and popularized or institutionalized discourses anchored therein". What counts as "language in use", he wrote, "are particular varieties of language: repertoires, registers, styles, genres, modes of usage". Blommaert (2005, 293) argued: "In much of the literature on linguistic rights a fundamentally flawed set of assumptions about language and society is being used, leading to assessments of language situations that are empirically not sustainable." We take this point a bit further to emphasise that what counts as the language of communication in use is much more than speech, which is so often the focus of linguists but also includes written language, references to and from writing, gesture and other embodied signs of interest and affect, as well as the actions, materials and artefacts that make up particular activities and communicative practices. Attention in the past to only the verbal has over-simplified our understanding of communication and learning in social contexts. We study language here as including speech, writing and other modes as well, including gestural, visual and kinetic modalities, while our focus is firstly and primarily on what people are 'up to', what they are 'doing' when they speak, write and communicate, and secondarily on the modes of communication that are in play.

### **3. Theoretical Framework: Language and Literacy Practices**

We draw on orientations to the theorisation and research of language, literacy and electronic media engagement which focus on their uses (see Prinsloo and Baynham, 2013

on Literacy Studies and Heller, 2007 on interactional sociolinguistics). We argue that we cannot make sense of or intervene in children's experiences of language, literacy and learning if we see languages and literacies in multilingual settings as stable and naturally bounded objects. Nor does it work to see literacy as 'simply reading and writing' in the sense of the activity as some kind of mental process to do with encoding and decoding print, acquired as a tool, skill or technology, which, once acquired, can be applied to any task that requires reading or writing. Reading and writing, as with speaking and other kinds of communicative interactivity, are always about reading and writing something, in specific ways as part of a specific activity involving particular material settings and artefacts. When people engage in particular activities they draw on background know-how, habits and dispositions which are often not based on or explicitly communicated as beliefs or rules; are passed on through interaction and activity and through objects of various kinds; are acquired and not explicitly learnt or taught; but nonetheless they characterise and shape our interactions with things and people, providing the resources that shape our sense of who we are and how things work. How people read and write as well as speak, act and make sense of visual data, what they read and write, what effects their reading and writing have and whether their skills and practices transfer well from one setting to another (e.g., from home to school and back, on the part of children) depend in very important ways on what they are 'up to' when they are speaking, reading and/or writing and how these practices are socially valued or discounted (Prinsloo, 2012). Contemporary children's emergent literacy and language identity practices cannot be studied without attention to their engagements with electronic resources (Luke and Luke, 2001). The proliferation of multimedia-based writing and meaning-making has accompanied the dramatic explosion of digitally organised communications technologies, including computers, phones, tablets and other devices, often linked to the Internet and using email, websites, Skype, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other communication and writing resources .

#### **4. Methodology and Research Sites**

We turn to our cases studies, to examine the language and literacy practices of children in two households in Cape Town. We examine children's early multimodal engagements with electronic media across contrasting socio-economic settings and enquire what resources

and trajectories in language and literacy engagements are being nurtured with what kinds of potential outcomes across these settings. We studied and contrasted two cases in the research we draw on in this paper, both families whose 'heritage language' is a Sotho language (Setswana, in one case and Sesotho or South Sotho, in the other). These languages are both amongst the listed eleven official languages in South Africa but there is almost no Sotho/Tswana-language mother tongue education available in the Western Cape where the two families live, for the reason that it is a region where the predominant languages are isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English. IsiXhosa or Afrikaans are the languages of instruction in the first three years of schooling for children in the townships, the Cape Flats and other poorer parts of the city while English is the language of instruction in the elite middle-class schools, as well as in schools for poorer families who want their children to go 'straight to English' at school, even when it is not a language spoken at home. After Grade Three English is the predominant language of learning in both township and middle-class schools. Tertiary education is predominantly English-language education.

The first family in our study lived in Site C, Khayelitsha, a crowded shack settlement (also sometimes referred to as an informal settlement area, or a squatter settlement, or a slum) outside Cape Town. Their home was a shack made from corrugated iron sheets and masonite, about 3½ by 4½ square metres, divided into several rooms by masonite dividers, in which the family of two parents and five children lived. The mother worked as a domestic worker, but was working only on Saturdays at this time. The father was a contract labourer on construction sites who had intermittent work. For the duration of the fieldwork he was not working. The major source of monthly household income at such times was by way of state-funded child-grants. The parents were Sotho speakers who came from Matatiele in the Eastern Cape to look for work in Cape Town. The mother had completed six years of schooling while the father had completed two. They spoke both Sesotho and isiXhosa to their visitors and friends in the neighbourhood, and to their children who always responded in isiXhosa, though they incorporated Sotho terms and phrases occasionally. Of the five children in the Mahlale family, Nthabiseng, a girl and Thabang, a boy were fourteen-year old twins; Nthateng, a girl and Thato, a boy, were ten-year old twins and Realeboha, a five-year old boy (all pseudonyms). The four older children attended a school in Khayelitsha.

The family got water from a public tap which was approximately 60 metres from their house. They had a connection to the city's electricity grid and neighbours who did not have a connection charged their phones in the Mahlale home and sometimes paid R10.00 for a haircut. A prominent device in the house was the television set, used for watching videos, in particular, one church video rather than live broadcasts. The TV attracted regular visitors, mostly Sesotho-speaking women and isiXhosa-speaking children from the neighbourhood. Seats were reserved for adults and the children usually sat on the floor. There were two mobile phones in the family, belonging to the parents, and used interchangeably by them, exclusively for making and taking voice-calls, and not for texting or for any other purpose. One of the phones had features which included FM radio and two preinstalled animated games, which were played by the children when they could get access to the phone. It had a relatively long-lasting battery compared to the other phone and the parents valued it for communicating with their family and friends. As a result, the children were allowed limited access to it. There was almost no evidence of printed matter in this household.

In the second household in the study, in a leafy middle-class suburb of Cape Town, the parents were working professionals, one as a quantity surveyor and the other as a project manager. Their three children were at middle-class monolingual English, fee-paying schools and were raised by their parents as English-language speakers, while their parents were bilingual speakers of Setswana, which was their first language, and English, which is the lingua franca of commerce, government and the middle-classes in South Africa. As 'Black middle-class' professionals the Bolton parents are part of a relatively recent but rapidly growing demographic in South Africa<sup>2</sup>. The parents, who are migrants to Cape Town, frequently speak Setswana between themselves, but not with their children. Their children strongly identify as Anglo-American in orientation. Given the opportunity to self-select their pseudonyms for Lemphane's original study (Lemphane, 2012) the eight-year-old girl said she would like to be known as 'Ashley', which was a name she liked and had formerly given to a doll of hers, and she picked Bolton as the family surname, borrowing it from a TV series,

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Black Middle Class" in South Africa, as an identifiable demographic for marketing purposes, had grown from 1.7 million in 2003 to 4.5 million individuals early in 2013, according to the University of Cape Town's Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing (<http://www.unileverinstitute.co.za>)



'The Boltons', featuring the much admired lead actor from the McGyver series. Her fourteen-year old brother chose the name Lars, from an X-box game character whom he admired and his ten-year old brother chose the name Josh on the basis that it was a name he had formerly used for his avatar on the 'virtual life' on-line simulation game that the children often played. They lived in a comfortable house with Internet connectivity, electricity and running water and had ample space to study and play. They were free to use the desktop computer anytime for schoolwork purposes but were only allowed to play on it on weekends. They watched television and played on a PlayStation connected to the TV.

Data was collected for a period of three months, from June to August 2011. The research model was that of contrastive ethnographic-style case studies (Heath and Street, 2008). Each family was visited on alternate weekends, when both children and their parents were at home. Lemphane, co-author here, observed and recorded activities while children played with particular digital media and carried out unstructured and semi-structured interviews. Collected data included recordings of conversations and researcher discussions with children and parents, photographs of children at play in their environment, screenshots of electronic images and text, and fieldnotes.

We focus in this paper on language and literacy interactions and how they are situated within particular activities and around available materials. We examine examples of children communicating and playing with each other and with electronic media resources. We are interested in the contrasts across the two families and what these might signal as to how children are acquiring resources, tacit knowledge and habits that will help or hinder them in other domains of practice, such as in school. In our analysis of the research findings here we start with the middle-class family, focusing on children's emerging language, literacy and identification practices.

## **5. Findings and Analysis**

### **5.1 The Bolton children's semiotic world**

The Bolton children absorbed the cultural capital that English language resources, digital hardware and unlimited broad-band connectivity in their home afforded them by way of connections to global middle-class cultural flows. One telling example was their play in the

virtual world of IMVU.com (<http://www.IMVU.com>) a '2<sup>nd</sup> life' teenage site that advertises itself as 'the world's largest 3D Chat and Dress Up Community', a favourite site of eight-year old Ashley and ten-year old Josh, where they selected avatars to represent themselves, made virtual friends and participated in on-line written conversation. Ashley explained: "It's just like your own mini-life!" The site provided participants with credits, which the children referred to as money. With the credits they bought clothes for their avatars, cared for virtual pets, bought houses, saved "money" and kept up friendships on-line.

Ashley used her avatar to communicate imagined things about herself and her eligibility to engage in the IMVU world. This eight-year-old African, dark-skinned girl projected herself through her selected avatar as a fair-skinned teenager (see Figure 1 below) whom she named Jessica Hawks (a name with 'Laura Croft'-like echoes, signalling, for us, both femininity and strength). Jessica Hawks had long blonde hair (most of the time), wore a stylish jacket, leggings and high-heeled shoes. This name and image together form a motivated and interested sign (Kress, 2010:6) through which Ashley constructed an on-line presence for herself. The sign simultaneously indexes the dominance of Anglo-American stereotypes in this virtual world, along with Ashley's absorption of their hegemonic status in this domain.

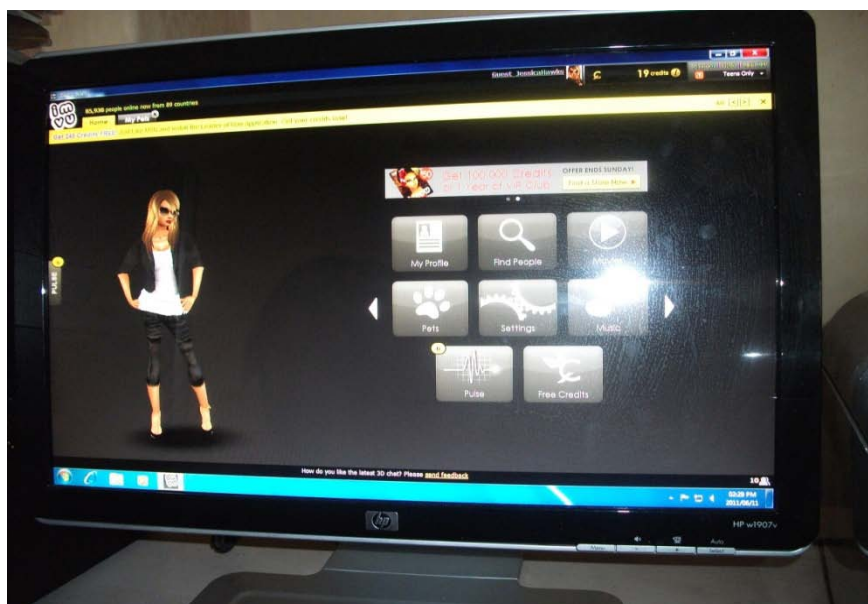


Figure 1: Jessica Hawks - Ashley's on-line avatar

We need to mention that Ashley's choice of avatar was limited to what was available for selection on the site, which was mostly but not exclusively white teenage avatars.

In addition to using the avatar as a semiotic resource to communicate things about her on-line self, and to identify with available signs of glamour and status, Ashley also on occasion experimented with different versions of her on-line self, changing her hair colour at one point and buying clothes and boots.

In the conversation below, Josh is surprised by Ashley's modifications:

1. **Josh : Is that you?**
2. **Ashley : Yeah**
3. **Josh : You buy a lot of stuff!**
4. **Ashley : No, I've had these boots for a long time.**

[Field notes]

It is apparent from this exchange that the children identified their on-line persona as 'themselves', but on-line. Merchant's (2009:52) observation that avatars gave children in his study a sense of ambiguity of presence would seem to apply here as well. Children in Merchant's study spoke of their experience of 'being in the computer' and 'seeing yourself'.

Besides 'dressing up', the children also took part in Chat room interactions, characterised by rapid typed conversations with other avatars. IMVU chat-room settings included hospital, classroom, hotel and aeroplane settings, all of them comfortably middle-class, as in the example below of a hotel chat room.



Figure 2: Ashley's avatar and another avatar in the jacuzzi at the hotel

IMVU members' presence in a chat room is marked by their avatar as well as their name above their heads, as in Figure 2 above. ('Guest\_' was used as a title followed by the name

of the participant/avatar in IMVU chat rooms.) This mix of image and writing as identity markers indicates that children engaged with both visual and linguistic modalities in relation to themselves and others. Participants joined in on conversations by typing in their utterances. Turn-taking was determined by the speed of electronic transmission as well as the speed of participants' responses (as noted also in Merchant 2009:300). On-line writing, in chat rooms as on mobile phones requires familiarity and skill in a particular repertoire, register and genre, though it is easy for participants to engage as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave and Wenger, 1991) while they learn and assimilate the resources needed for skilful participation in this community of practice and social semiotic domain.

5. **Guest\_cherx1 has joined the chat**
6. **Guest\_grc1997: babe**
7. **Guest\_Magdalaniia: yes srry iM 15**
8. **Guest\_zacyblond: RUN**
9. **Guest\_Magdalaniia: yuu**
10. **Guest\_grc1997: 15**
11. **Guest\_JessicaHawks: hi**
12. **Guest\_Magdalaniia: when yur birthday**
13. **Guest\_GirTheRobotisAwesome: i'm soooooooooo bored**
14. **Guest\_grc1997: ccan u send me some credits**
15. **Guest\_Vegasprincess97: hi**
16. **Guest\_zacyblond: RUN**
17. **Guest\_JessicaHawks: me too**
18. **Guest\_grc1997: 12-22-95**
19. **Guest\_grc1997: u**
20. **Guest\_Vegasprincess97: hi**
21. **Guest\_cherx1: hey**
22. **Guest\_JessicaHawks: so do u like to swim?**
23. **Guest\_GirTheRobotisAwesome: heyyyy pppl**
24. **Guest\_GirTheRobotisAwesome: ppl**
25. **Guest\_cherx1: u all ok**
26. **[Chat room conversation]**

While there is little coherence or apparent substance in the above exchange, there is evidence of domain-specific skill in the writing (or txtspk), including the use of contractions, punctuation, capital letters and letters repeated to communicate affect or get attention (line 9: soooooooooo bored; line 19: heyyyy pppl), while there is no policing for consistency in orthography, punctuation or abbreviations. The effect of txtspk is to allow a written form

that is close to speech and uncluttered by inflexible rules, allowing for rapid writing as well as displays of creativity as well as attitude. The rules of standard grammar and orthography can be variably bent for communicative affect. This flexibility offers children encouragement to develop phonemic and phonetic awareness (a sense of what the distinct sounds are in speech and how to represent them in the signs of writing), because it takes skill and know-how to successfully break rules for purposes of shared peer communication.

Avatar-based play on IMVU also offered opportunities for interactive socio-dramatic play and role-experimentation. For ten-year old Josh, flirting with (apparently) teen-age girls was clearly an enjoyable activity, invoking for us, with some irony, Vygotsky's well-known comment about the importance of play as a channel for young children's learning (although Vygotsky was thinking of three-year olds):

In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself (Vygotsky 1978:102).

Josh named his avatar "TonyAlvaBieber" to signal his 'coolness' and his access to global youth culture as a Justin Bieber fan. The figure below shows Josh's avatar and two others in an aeroplane lounge setting.

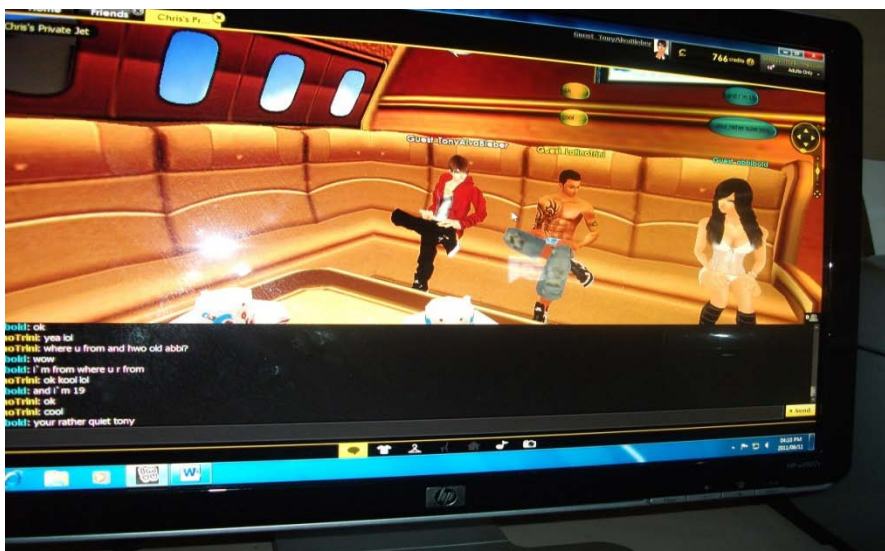


Figure 3: 'Teenagers' flirting in a chat site

Josh used a mouse to move his avatar (the one wearing a red-jacket in the above screenshot), he read others' chat and typed in his replies at the bottom of the screen.

### 27. Guest\_abbibold: so u want me to leave

28. Guest\_abbibold: hey i told u to stay over there
29. Guest\_LatinoTrini: no we would like u to stay if u like
30. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: lol
31. Guest\_abbibold: lol
32. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: u like her??
33. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: lol
34. Guest\_abbibold: guysdont follow me
35. Guest\_abbibold: sit over there
36. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: okay i won't
37. Guest\_abbibold: ok
38. Guest\_LatinoTrini: haha
39. Guest\_LatinoTrini: she seems shy tony haha
40. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: not shure about latino
41. Guest\_abbibold: i`m not shy
42. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: u are
43. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: lol
44. Guest\_LatinoTrini: haha
45. Guest\_abbibold: i`m not shy
46. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: admit it
47. Guest\_abbibold: i`m not
48. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: ur shy
49. Guest\_LatinoTrini: so why u sitting so far then
50. Guest\_abbibold: really noooooooooo
51. Guest\_LatinoTrini: anddont want us to come closer lol
52. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: U shy
53. Guest\_abbibold: because i`m the only girl on this plane
54. Guest\_abbibold: i`m not shy
55. Guest\_abbibold: lol
56. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: if aren't why u sittin so far away??
57. Guest\_LatinoTrini: huh lol
58. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: yeah why??
59. Guest\_LatinoTrini: what about a 3sum see i not shy lol
60. Guest\_LatinoTrini: LOL
61. Guest\_abbibold: if i was shy i wouldn`t be talking to u guys
62. Guest\_abbibold: lol
63. Guest\_abbibold: a 3sum nice one but noooooooooo
64. Guest\_LatinoTrini: well then here is not fun lol
65. Guest\_LatinoTrini: what else can we do gosh lol
66. Guest\_abbibold: lol
67. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: nothin
68. Guest\_TonyAlvaBieber: where u going??

**69. Guest\_abbibold: u guys can have a 2sum**  
**[Chat room conversation]**

The two boys, *TonyAlvaBieber* and *LatinoTrini*, joined up to flirt with the girl, *Abbibold*. As Walton (2009) pointed out with regard to South African teenagers', on-line chat activity is prominently associated with flirting and in this example Josh is getting some early practice in flirting at a global level. The two boys teased *Abbibold* about her 'shyness' and constructed her as the object of their joint attention. They used 'insider' terms "Haha" (line 13) and "Lol" (line 17) to communicate attitudes, humour and solidarity. They abbreviated each other's names ("tony" - line 13 and "latino" - line 14) to signal familiarity and collaboration. *LatinoTrini*'s suggestion of a 3-sum (line 33) suggests that he is probably older and more a teenager than Josh and *Abbibold*'s smart clincher (u guys can have a 2sum – line 43) suggest that she is a teenager too and enjoying the attention as well as the power she holds here. Josh nonetheless manages to preserve face in this exchange despite his pre-teenage inexperience.

The literacy practice, which is a talk-like written interaction, encouraged the Bolton children to read and write back to their on-line friends. The children's participation in chat rooms helped them to become familiar with new media practices and also allowed them to develop confidence in themselves as meaning-makers while taking on and experimenting with particular social personae. They are enabled to accumulate residues of experience with literacy as a resource for embedded communication of a particular kind that is linked to pleasurable social interactivity.

The Bolton children's off-line PlayStation gaming activities were also a source of focused, pleasurable activity for them, in play conditions where text, image, animations and sound were integrated, where they were interactively involved with the digital material as well as with each other (see Lankshear and Knobel 2003:62 for similar observations of children and gaming). The simulated nature of much of this kind of play allowed them to develop a range of topic-specific vocabulary and related experiences. Car-racing was one example which we look at briefly here:

- 1. Josh : Yeah, it's one-on-one**
- 2. Josh : Only me and Ashley racing**
- 3. Ashley : Look at my speed limit**

4. Lemphane : It's too high
5. Josh : Hundred and fifty
6. Ashley : Ahaaa!

For Ashley, speed in the game in relation to actual speed limits in real life are of interest and she draws attention to this in line 3, whereas her brother was interested in going as fast as he possibly could and winning. Ashley appeared to choose to be a cautious 'driver' and treated the driving event as related to a real life event where there real risks. Josh chose to be a 'racing driver' with no thoughts about danger. Their choices allowed them to learn about factors which lead to winning and losing the game:

7. Ashley : So glad there is no security of speed
8. Josh : I'm gonna do something else
9. Josh : Ashley come I'm waiting for you
10. Ashley : It's my highest speed that I'm gonna do for now
11. Josh : I'll wait for you then I'll destroy you
12. Ashley : Oh you will destroy me? Uh I'm really scared
13. Josh : Wait. (*Singing*) Wait and see. Yeah, here she comes like a mad man
14. Ashley : Yebo!
15. Josh : Oh there, there you go
16. Ashley : I'm first, I'm first, I'm first, I'm first, I'm first, I'm first
17. Josh : You won't be after this

Josh 'waited' for his sister at one point, as a display of his prowess and to show that he could beat her even with a self-imposed handicap but landed up crashing and losing the race. The activity thus allowed space for children to compete, assert identity positions and observe outcomes, all in the context of having fun and entertaining each other. Clearly, much of the fun included their interaction with each other, including play with language, as in the example below:

18. Josh: Do you wanna change the area?
19. Lars : Yeah, Santa Monica
20. Ashley : It's not Santa Monica, it's Sanda Monica (*with American accent*)
21. Lars : Sana ... do you have to act the movie style?
22. Ashley : Next time we go to Monaco

The children were exposed to different accents, such as the South African English accent at school and American English, which they heard on television and in their electronic media play and could therefore play with different pronunciations. Through such exposure and



play they were given space to develop meta-awareness around language while acquiring flexible high status resources, dispositions and background know-how.

## **5.2 The Mahlale children at play**

We move now to consider our contrasting group of children in the Mahlale home in Khayelitsha. We start with a widely observed point that has been made with regard to Cape Town, to the rest of South Africa and also with regard to the rest of Africa, namely, that most people do not have computer access but do have mobile phone access and that Internet activity is predominantly phone-based for most people, rather than computer-based.

While in 2000 only one in 50 Africans had access to a mobile phone, the figure is now close to one in two. South Africa – followed by Kenya and Nigeria – has the highest user rates in sub-Saharan Africa, and it is estimated that between 80 and 90 per cent of the population are regular users of mobile phones (Deumert, 2010:1).

Such observations have led to calls for out-of-school educational interventions that are mobile phone-based (Deumert, 2010; Walton, 2010). However, such data does not start to examine the particularities or quality of working-class children's access and engagement with mobile phones. Our case study here offers a more complex view.

The first point to note is that the Mahlale children had no computer access at all and were allowed only limited access to their parents' mobile phones, in particular because prolonged play with the phone caused the battery to run down and also because their mother, at least, did not see any educational value in children's digital play. The conversation below starts to illustrate this point. The exchange is between their father and a visitor, Mr Lebaka, who came to borrow a music CD. They are speaking Sesotho.

**23. Mr Lebaka: He!, ena ea hau ea sebeta founu! Ha e na tsatsi la mahala. [This phone of yours really works! It does not have a free day]**

**24. Mr Mahlale: E ea geta betri (*Softly*) [It will exhaust the battery]**

**25. Mr Lebake: Ha e ka siuoa chacheng mono feela, ba e bona feela... [If it is left there on the charger, and they see it...] (giggles from the children)**

The children had taken the mobile phone off the charger when Mr Mahlale was not looking. The children had two strategies to get hold of one of the phones: one was to wait for a

phone to be put on a charger, so that they could take it and play with it; the other was to ask visitors to their home if they could 'see' their phones. When they 'saw' a phone, the children played with it to see what games it had, how it's recording mode worked, as well as examining the different ringing tones it had. The children's mother was even more reluctant than their father to give them access to the phones. We note here a contrast with Marsh's (2004) findings that the working-class parents in her study in the North of England were supportive of their children's playing with new media.

The conversation below was between Thabang, Mathabang and the researcher:

- 26. Lemphane : Ha le bapale ka fono tsatsing lee? [Are you not playing with the phone today?]**
- 27. Thabang : Foune ea ntate haeo. [Father's phone is not there.]**
- 28. Lemphane : Ha le sebelise ea 'M'e? [Don't you use your mother's?]**
- 29. Thabang : Rea e sebelisa. (*Nervously*) [We use it.]**
- 30. 'Mathabang : Ba tseba hore 'na ha ke ts'oane le ntat'oa bona, 'na ke bohale. [They know that I am not like their father. I am strict.]**

The children were never seen to make phone calls nor send SMSes. The parents' restrictions regarding children's use of mobile phones, as they protected these costly resources, gave the children limited access to digital play, in contrast with their middle class peers. Not only was their access restricted but the conditions of play were also constrained by the limited space available in the home, as well as the parents' attitudes to children's noise. When they played inside, the children often had to play silently so as not to annoy their parents or their visitors in the crowded collective space which they all occupied. As a result they also missed out on the interactive (language-) learning that the Bolton children had access to, as shown earlier.

The children's digital play consisted mostly of silently playing, or silently watching each other play the one available game on the cheaper and older Vodafone 150 phone, to which they had greater access than the better phone.



Figure 4: The only game on the mobile phone

The task in the game was to move three rings from one pole and stack them on the next pole in the same order, as the diagram below illustrates. Success would lead to the next level with an additional ring, and so on.

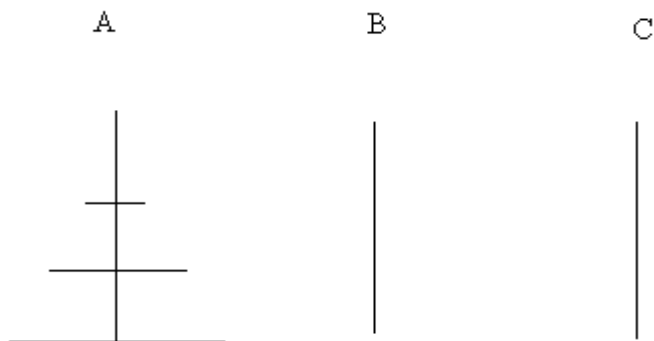


Figure 5

While the game apparently has some value for teaching logic and strategy, it provides no language development opportunities at all. Despite the limited scope of the game, the children enjoyed it and had played it many times.

### 5.2.1 Language, new media and identification practices

When the children did have space to talk while playing the relatively restricted game above, their talk tended to not be about the game but about other things. In the conversation

below, Thato dreams of having a 'Playstation' while he is playing the rings game on the phone. The other children explore his fantasy with him.

31. Thato : *Abanye abantwana esikolweni baphatha iplaystation badlale yona* [Some children take PlayStation to school and play with it]
32. Thabang: *Uyaxoka* [You are lying]
33. Nthabiseng : *Hayibo Mputi* [No Mputi]
34. Thabang : *Ifakwa etivini iplaystation* [It is connected to a TV]
35. Thabang : *Yimalini iplaystation ?* [How much is PlayStation]
36. Thato : *Ninety rand* [Ninety rand]
37. Thabang : *Phi ?* [Where?]
38. Thato : *Apha Machaeneng* [There at the Chinese shop]
39. Nthabiseng : *Machaeneng* [At the Chinese shop]
40. Thabang : *Ewe bendifuna ukudlala, iphum'nto ezinintsi, ifuneka iconnektwe etivini. Xa uzofuna umntu umdlalise wenze imali* [Yes, in order to play it, it needs many things, it needs to be connected to a TV. When someone needs to play, make him/her pay and make money]
41. Nthabiseng : *Utheng'amagwinya* [You buy fat cakes]
42. Thabang : *For electricity le abadlala ngayo* [For electricity which they play with]
43. Nthabiseng : *Hayibo, Ndithenge is'kipa sePirates* [No, I buy pirates T-shirt]
44. Thabang : *Umntu xa efuna ukudlala, udlala nge-rand iplaystation.* [Anyone who wants to play, plays the playstation for one rand]
45. Nthabiseng : *Ewe ungena nge-randi* [Yes, they will enter with one rand]
46. Thabang : *'Cause umbani* [Because electricity]
47. Nthabiseng : *Ewe uyamoshakala umbani ungena nge-randi.* [Yes, electricity is expended; you have to enter with one rand]

There are some interesting elements in the children's discussion. Firstly, their language use shows a colloquial version of isiXhosa that draws on Sesotho and English, besides the more common borrowings from English and Afrikaans that are already part of Standard isiXhosa. We will point to two examples here: The children's word for the 'Chinese shop' is *Machaeneng* (line 8) which is a Sesotho construct, rather than the isiXhosa term which would be *emaTshayineni*. Line 12 shows a mix of English and isiXhosa: *For electricity le abadlala ngayo* [For electricity which they play with].

It is an interesting question as to why the children talk about the Playstation as they do. Firstly, it is a surprise to hear that it only costs R90 (less than \$US7). Secondly, it is notable that they think first of its exchange value rather than its use value – that they could use it, if they had one, to get vetkoek (fatcakes), football club supporter T-shirts (Pirates FC, a

glamour club based in Soweto) and electricity. The PlayStation, it turns out, is more accessible than it might have seemed to be. What they have in mind is actually a cheap, more limited electronic toy that they have seen on sale locally, with only a few basic games on it, not as unattainable as might first seem to be the case, but still out of reach at this time. The 'Chinese shop' raises echoes of global trade but the shop is one of thousands of similar low cost outlets scattered throughout poorer urban and residential sites throughout South Africa, staffed by immigrant Chinese with limited English-language resources, selling cheap imitations of popular goods. Lastly, the children's sense that the PlayStation could be a potential money-making artefact probably reflects the influence of both their parents and their wider environment, in a neighbourhood where few people have reliable income sources and everything that has value is considered tradeable.

#### **6. Discussion: Implications of children's different encounters with new media**

Our research focus on children's language activity has focused on questions of language and use of new media resources. In both our cases we see evidence of language shift across one generation. The contrasting language movements of the groups of children, to monolingual English in the case of the Boltons and to a colloquial version of isiXhosa on the part of the Mahlele children, point to their contrasting class trajectories and consequently to their likely contrasting futures, in school and beyond. While the Bolton children are learning to think of themselves as legitimate participants in local, on-line, globally connected middle-class English language-based culture, the Mahlele children are acquiring linguistic resources that are localised, indexical of their sub-elite status and not associated with success in schooling (Janks, 2010; Fleisch, 2008; Bloch, 2009). English is the language of the political and economic elite, in South Africa, as much as in Tanzania, Kenya and elsewhere in Africa (Blommaert, 2005) and we see here evidence of elite-reproduction processes and examples of English language gate-keeping functions. As relatively privileged migrants the Boltons are able to benefit from their mobility more than the less privileged Mahlele family precisely due to their affinity with dominant ideologies of language that define what counts as legitimate and authentic language. For the Boltons, online reading and writing practices using flexible English language registers give them tacit knowledge and practical skills that are likely to become second nature to them, part of their youthful identity practices which

they can draw on and adapt in school language, literacy and learning contexts. The schools where children do well in South Africa favour those children who bring monolingual standard English language resources to school over those who bring code-switched multilingual versions of African languages as their primary resources. These dynamics help to explain why the Bolton parents show no interest in 'heritage language' maintenance for their children nor in passing on their own bilingualism. They instead follow what is at present a common, though not universal pattern amongst the emerging middle-classes in South African of a 'straight for English' approach to their children's language acquisition, at home and at school, strongly shaped by the status that English-language fluency holds in popular perception and in practice, in a context where levels of social inequalities are amongst the world's highest and languages serve social gatekeeping or excluding functions.

If we think of the two sets of children's engagement with digital electronic and networked resources as their emerging literacy practices, we can see elements of how inequalities are produced and processes of class reproduction start to happen in home contexts in relation to new media resources. While it is widely understood that the development and diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) are having a profound effect on modern life, our attention is thus drawn to how differently they are engaged with across these two contexts. In Warschauer and Matuchniak's (2010, 179) summary, the promise of new media resources is the following: They bridge "the interactive features of speech and the archival characteristics of writing"; they allow "many-to-many communication among people without regard to time and space"; and they facilitate "the creation of a global hyper-indexed multimodal information structure". We can conclude from our data that all of these promises are met or are starting to be met in the case of the pre-teenage Bolton children and none are being met at all in the case of the Mahlele's. Such access is, of course, of a social nature as well as a technological nature and the Mahlele parents' attitudes to their children's use of cellphones for play purposes, particularly their mother's, lead to their access being further restricted.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize the particularities of children's engagements in each setting, that is, the way that they engaged with new media devices as placed resources

(Prinsloo, 2005) which were shaped by local circumstances and indicative of wider social dynamics. Examples of these placed elements are the Bolton children's avatars that were light-skinned with Anglo names. We can see this as an instance where children in Africa participating in global middle-class culture are learning how to manage their historically inscribed *black* bodies in what are predominantly and hegemonically *white* spaces at this time. While it is uncertain that the Bolton children will always be as at ease with these identity practices as they now appear to be we can nonetheless read this as part of a larger process where class differences amongst African children take on globalised cultural dimensions, by way of language practices and online media practices, that sharpen differences between middle-class children and poorer children.

In the case of the Mahlale children we see a very different kind of engagement to the Boltons, where the children lack any experienced sense of the affordances of media resources such as PlayStation. Their limited access to mobile phones in crowded living conditions where children are cautioned not to make noise does not allow them to engage with the developmental potentials of these resources and nor do they have the sociocultural backgrounds or linguistic resources to engage with the new media. As we noticed, the Mahlale children's fantasies moved quickly to the potential of trading access to such resources for profit thus pointing to the particularities and foci that characterise their social worlds. We can see how both groups of children display localised responses to global resources and that the differences between the two groups of children as regards their language practices and media engagements point to substantial social inequalities which they bring to school and then experience in school as judgements about their individualised 'abilities', where school strategies in language and literacy are not alive to the social and linguistic diversity that characterises contemporary social settings.

## References

- Bloch, G. 2009. The toxic mix: What's wrong with South Africa's schools and how to fix it. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
- Blommaert, J. 2005. Situating language rights: English and Swahili in Tanzania revisited. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 9(3), 390-417.

- Deumert, A. 2010. Supporting indigenous literacies in the digital space. Report compiled for the Shuttleworth Foundation. [http://m4lit.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/m4lit\\_indigenous\\_literacies\\_adeumert\\_2010.pdf](http://m4lit.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/m4lit_indigenous_literacies_adeumert_2010.pdf) Accessed January 2013.
- Errington, J. 2008 *Linguistics in a Colonial World: A Story of Language, Meaning, and Power*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fleisch, B. 2008. *Primary education in crisis: why South African schoolchildren underachieve in reading and mathematics*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Harries, P. 2007. *Butterflies and Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries and Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Harries, P. 2001. Missionaries, Marxists and Magic: Power and the Politics of Literacy in South East Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27(3):405-27.
- Heath, S.B. and Street, B.V. 2008. *Ethnography: Approaches to language and literacy research*. London: Routledge.
- Heller, M. 2007. *Bilingualism: A Social Approach*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Lemphane, P. 2012. A contrastive ethnographic study of children's digital literacy practices in two homes in Cape Town. Masters Minor Dissertation, School of Education, University of Cape Town.
- Makoni, S. & Pennycook, A. 2007. *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Mamdani, M. 2012. What is a tribe? *London Review of Books*, 34(17): 20-22.
- Mamdani, M. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Marsh, J. 2004. The techno-literacy practices of young children. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 2(1), 55-66.
- Merchant, G. 2009. Literacy in virtual worlds. *Journal of research in reading*, 32(1), 38-56.



- Prinsloo, M. 2012. What counts as English? In B. Street and C. Leung (eds) *English - a Changing Medium for Education*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 22-40.
- Prinsloo, M. 2005. The new literacies as placed resources. *Perspectives in Education*, 24(3), 1-12.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. (Trans. M. Cole). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walton, M. 2009. Mobile literacies and South African teens: Leisure reading, writing, and MXit chatting for teens in Langa and Guguletu. Centre for Film and Media Studies, University of Cape Town.
- Warschauer, M and Matuchniak, T. 2010 New Technology and Digital Worlds: Analyzing Evidence of Equity in Access, Use, and Outcomes, *Review of Research In Education*, 34: 179-225.
- Widdowson, H. 2010. The theory of practice. In Cook, G. and North, S. (Eds). *Applied Linguistics in Action: A Reader*. London and Milton Keynes: Routledge and Open University, 7-18.