

Martyn, J. (2022). *Discourses, Identities and Investment in Foreign Language Learning*. Series Second Language Acquisition: 154. Bristol/Jackson: Multilingual Matters, pp. 164.

Sarah Berthaud, Atlantic Technological University

Discourses, Identities and Investment in Foreign Language Learning is the result of what was started as a PhD thesis by Jennifer Martyn and has resulted in a 164-page rich monograph on identity for foreign language learners at secondary level in Ireland from a post-structural perspective.

The monograph seeks to examine the connections between foreign language learners, the Irish schooling system (and its related-practices and context), and how learners speak about their language learning experience, and thus construct their identities. To do so, the researcher has conducted an ethnographic study in one secondary school in county Galway in the West of Ireland through the use of observations and semi-structured interviews with learners and semi-structured interviews with one foreign language teacher.

It is a book aimed at scholars – students and researchers alike – and hopes to appeal to “those without a specific interest in language education in Ireland [who] will benefit from the discussion of discourses that are prevalent across English-speaking contexts and beyond” (2022, p. 15). This monograph is a very welcome addition to an area – that of foreign language teaching and learning in Ireland and in Anglophone countries by extension – that is lacking in terms of publications. This is especially true at a time when the Irish government is seeking to buck the trend in terms of foreign language learning and acquisition and is trying to increase the number of foreign language learners and improve foreign language teaching and learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2017; Post-Primary Language Initiative, 2020).

The ethnographic approach adopted is invaluable in that it provides direct access to the learners in situ and thus information on the entire learning ecosystem. This is very well documented throughout the book, which follows a very logical progression.

This monograph is divided into 6 chapters. The first one provides a very clear and concise description of the education situation in Ireland at secondary level. Secondary schooling has recently undergone substantial changes (via reforms and recent immigration trends for instance) and this chapter succeeds in giving information on historical traditions and current changes. Chapter 1 also motivates the need for such a book. It explains how discourse, ideology, and identity are intertwined and can be studied to examine language education, eliteness, and gender. Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical underpinnings essential to the work undertaken in terms of identity, ideology, and multilingualism. It draws on the work of scholars (e.g., Pavlenko, 2002) who show multilingualism more likely than monolingualism to be the social norm and the need of scholars to rethink any monolingual perspective.

Martyn builds on the arguments developed by Norton (2013), especially when it comes to the impact of globalisation and capitalism on language ideologies. This justifies her examining language ideologies in the Irish community as it allows her to investigate if and how languages are commodified by society (via the school offering) and the learners. Chapter 3 examines the theoretical underpinnings to the work carried out. It does so from an educational perspective for both gender and language in general and in the Irish context.

Gender-wise and within the Irish context, Martyn addresses misconceptions about gender and secondary schooling that are perpetuated by the system (i.e., that single-sex schools lead to better achievements for girls). She also discusses in depth the differences in expectations associated to gender and school achievement. She then moves to reviewing gender-associated discourse in relation to language use and learning. Chapter 3 is essential in setting the background to the actual study conducted here. Chapter 4 introduces the specific research

methodology used in the present research: it gives information about the actual Secondary School sampled and the participants recruited in the study. It further provides details about the methods used – namely observations and semi-structured interviews, the number of students observed and interviews, the duration of the study, the spaces accessed by the researcher to name but a few. Chapter 4 describes how the data has been analysed in terms of relation to the community, space, and identities. Some of the not-so-striking results sadly show how the school space is sex-segregated on a regular basis physically and by discourse (e.g., the sports areas are mainly for the use of males; females who do not conform to the female archetype may struggle to find comfortable space on school grounds where they are not criticised). Chapter 5 contains the main results of the study conducted – that is to say, it analyses how the participants view the choice (or lack thereof) they make when selecting a foreign language to study and how to express their perceptions about language learning (in general and their own), and their identities. It shows how peers and personal experience can seriously influence the choices made. Friends are more likely to choose the same language. Learners who have a positive experience of the language – whether via primary school foreign language initiatives or holidays or family links – are also much more likely to choose that language. The study also shows the disconnect between ideologies and the foreign language available for study at school. The final chapter, Chapter 6, offers a reflection on the results detailed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Martyn summarises this succinctly: “Language learning is discursively constructed as a middle-class pursuit, associated with material and symbolic resources, and possesses a gendered dimension that is rarely discussed in foreign language education circles in Ireland” (2022, p.132). This conclusion has extensive implications for foreign language learning at secondary level, especially when it comes to policy. She echoes Bruen’s argument (2021) that if the Irish government is serious about increasing the uptake of foreign languages, serious top-down investment is needed to: (i)

diversify the language offering in secondary schools; (ii) reinforce the implementation of foreign language learning in primary schools; and (iii) increase higher education opportunities for foreign language study.

This monograph is an essential piece of research for foreign language teaching and learning. Even if some of the results provided are to be expected, like how spending holidays in a foreign country could motivate learners to choose to learn that language, the present ethnographical study provides invaluable empirical data that can – and hopefully will – be used to improve foreign language teaching and learning, not only at secondary but also primary and higher levels. Let's hope this book paves the way for further ethnographic research on foreign language teaching and learning in Anglophone countries.

References

- Bruen, J. (2021). The place of foreign languages in the Irish education system. In U. Lanvers, A. Thompson and M. East (Eds.) *Language Learning in Anglophone Countries: Challenges, Policies, Ways Forward* (pp. 37-52). London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Department of Education and Skills. (2017). *Languages Connect: Ireland's strategy for foreign languages in education 2017-2026*. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dd328-languages-connect-irelands-strategy-for-foreign-languages-in-education-2017-2026/>
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and Language Learning: Extending the Conversation (2nd ed.)*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Pavlenko, A. (2002). Poststructuralist approaches to the study of social factors in second language learning and use. In V. Cook (Ed.) *Portraits of the L2 User* (pp. 275-302). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Post-Primary Languages Initiative. (2020). *Annual report 2020*. <https://ppli.ie/news/ppli-annual-report-2020/>