Mobility, immobility, and sexual transaction: Dirty socio-pragmatics in Cambodia

Abstract

This study focuses on the performance of a small story by a Cambodian man discussing transactional same-sex relationship practices between local men and globally mobile men from the global north, who pass through as visitors. In doing so, this study examines how metropole and southern experiences of space and time (i.e. chronotopes) intersect and become entangled. It therefore reveals a process in which the use of language shapes a negotiation of power and agency. The empirical data presented here form part of a larger linguistic ethnographic project, conducted with local men in a major Cambodian tourist city, that sought to explore the discursive conditions that inform and enable these relationship practices. Utilizing a positioning analysis of a small story, as performed in interaction with one of the researchers (a white, middle-class, queer man from the global north), the broader analysis draws attention to the socio-pragmatic awareness of these local men in the telling of their stories. This encompasses the positioning of selves and others across space and time through the invocation of relevant and affective historicities, to justify sexual transaction in this setting. In these cases, the analysis reveals more broadly how subjugated knowledges may permit immobile populations to actively shape the "stayed in" and "local" context to better suit their own needs, manipulating the globally mobile, metropolitan middle class for personal gain. By asking where agency lies in these interactions and how gender and sexuality play a role, we can begin to challenge assumptions about agency, awareness, and power and how they are accessed in multiple ways in a globally southern context. The presentation will also examine implications of chronotopes for a 'dirty' socio-pragmatic analysis, one that 'talks back' to potentially universalizing chronotopic theories in a necessarily messy cross-fertilization of ideas in the margins.

1. Introduction

In this ethnographic paper on global flows of language and sexuality we seek to provide an exploratory and therefore open-ended discussion of how a consideration of chronotopes, or "ideologized differentiations in time-space" (Park 2017: 25; Bahktin 1981; Blommaert 2015), may give us analytical purchase towards making socio-linguistic sense of particular social actions and meaning-making in sexualized centre/periphery contact zones (Farrer 2011; Hoefinger 2013). The contact zones in this study are the queer spaces (e.g. gay bars, hotels and spas) of a tourist city in Cambodia, in which globally and economically mobile gay men from the global North encounter the Cambodian men who serve and befriend them. They often go on to form relationships with these Cambodian men who are, in relative terms, globally and economically immobile.

Ethnographic engagement with the social actors in these spaces has revealed how these transnational queer relationships often involve various levels of economic support in exchange for friendship or, in some cases, sexual intimacy (Rowlett 2018; 2019). These relationships broadly fall under the gamut of what are locally termed as 'sponsorship' arrangements, a relocalization of NGO discourse in which locals enter into an agreement with

non-Cambodians who provide financial support for their personal development. Sponsorship arrangements cover a broad spectrum and can be institutionally brokered, for example when an employer funds an employee's English lessons, but they can also be arranged on a more personal and informal level; the type of action we are concerned with here (Rowlett 2019).

In this regard, these relationships can result in upward social and economic mobility for the 'sponsored' Cambodian, who receives financial support for schooling, living costs, and material goods. Foregrounding the sexual intimacy sometimes involved in these same-sex transactional relationships, as we do in this research, may bring to the fore abiding Northern discourses of sex tourism and therefore the moral contraventions these discourses invoke; for example, those of predation, victimization and exploitation. Consequently, a focus on social practices at North/South intersections such as this one inevitably brings us, as researchers from Northern contexts, into uncomfortable spaces for theoretical, methodological and analytical reflection. A typical reading of context, and therefore static reading (Blommaert 2017), might interpret this globally Southern 'context' in such a way that, in the Northern imagination, 'impoverished' locals are at the mercy of predatory male sex tourists, and it would be easy to interpret these transactional relationships solely in terms of unidirectional power imposition (cf. Mai 2013; Hoefinger 2013). However, adhering to such a static reading of context may only serve to perpetuate modernist 'emancipatory', and thus essentializing, practices that tend to define Southern contexts in terms of particular time-space configurations (i.e. chronotopes) that may be in some way acquiescent to those of the North (Fabian 2003; Milani 2014). With this in mind, and in line with the themes of this panel, we aim to explore how an ethnographic consideration of chronotopes as entanglements of North/South knowledges may enable us to construct a more nuanced understanding of the socio-pragmatic behaviours associated with these transactional relationship practices and their contexts of (im)mobility.

After a brief explanation of how we are defining and utilizing the notion of chronotopes in this study, we will conduct a positioning analysis of the performance of a small story that focuses on same-sex sponsorship practices, one that that emerged from an interview between the researcher and a male Cambodian informant. This analysis addresses the positioning of actors/actions through the invocation and manipulation of time-space configurations as a constitutive part of the linguistic performance and interaction. In this way, the analysis will act as a springboard for discussions on how chronotopes may be used to make sense of mobility and immobility, sexuality, power, agency and awareness, with respect to the socio-pragmatics of sexual transaction and North/South knowledge entanglements in this setting. The paper will conclude by briefly examining how our chronotope-driven analysis relates to the conference theme, putting forth preliminary suggestions of how a 'dirty' socio-pragmatic analysis (i.e. one in which the researcher's feet are 'on the ground' in the local setting – Connell 2007) might enrich chronotopic theories that have thus far been grounded in metropole thought. Thus we attempt to occupy a vulnerable position in the margins while engaging in a cross-fertilization of ideas.

2. Chronotopes and mobility

The concept of chronotope has been utilized in various sociolinguistic studies, especially those concerned with globalization and mobility (Lo and Park 2017), to represent the dynamics of

time-space configurations in social interaction. Moving beyond its conceptual origins in literary theory (Bahktin 1981), the chronotope's utility has been demonstrated in sociolinguistics through the analytical traction it affords us when faced with the inadequacies of well-worn terms such as 'context' to describe complex and dynamic forms of linguistic and therefore social behavior (Blommaert 2015; 2017). Chronotopes, as units that link space-time to ideological and moral orders governing social types and behaviours, can be seen to function as "mobile units of context" (Blommaert 2017: 96) that co-occur to organize and thus provide meaning to social interaction. The notion of the chronotope is consequently well placed to ethnographically account for socio-pragmatic behaviours that may not be adequately explained with recourse to a view of context as "local, stable, static, and given" (Blommaert 2017: 95). In this paper, it is precisely this understanding of chronotopes as intersecting mobile units of context that allows us to interpret the social action of same-sex sponsorship in a way that resists hasty analytical essentialism.

In this sense, firstly we see chronotopes in terms of mobility here as portable experiences of space time, or knowledges (including value systems and expectations of conduct), that are brought along by social actors as "historical bodies" (Scollon and Scollon 2004) to interactions in this North/South contact zone. These are bodies that carry with them chronotopes forged in historically different experiences and scales of space time i.e. those of the North and those of the South, but it is within the contact zone that these historical bodies intersect and become entangled. As a result, new chronotopes and indexical orders emerge through which 'sponsorship' relationships can be made not only comprehensible but more importantly justifiable. Secondly, we see mobility with respect to chronotopes as semiotic resources or assets. These are "invokable histories" (Blommaert 2015: 112) that in these cases are mobilized and manipulated in discourse towards the construction of affective impacts which sustain the sexualized economies of 'sponsorship'. In this way, our analysis of chronotopes in interaction reveals how the subjugated, or 'lower scale' knowledges in global hierarchies may be permitting some Cambodian men to shape the 'stayed in' and 'local' to suit their needs. This shaping is done through the knowing, metapragmatic manipulation of the 'higher-scale' knowledges associated with the globally mobile middle class for personal gain.

3. Background to the narrative

The small story (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) we analyze here emerges from an interview extract conducted in English between one of the researchers and a self-identified gay Cambodian man, Vit. His experiences working in the queer tourist spaces of the city have seen him witness a number of 'sponsorship' relations formed between local staff members and tourists. Vit's small story forms part of a broader narrative-oriented linguistic ethnography conducted over a number of months in the queer spaces of the city, in which the researcher's position, or historical body, as a white, queer, older, observer/participant enabled access to and first-hand experiences of the practices under discussion. As such, this position is given due consideration in the positioning analysis of the narrative event (Davies and Harré 1990; De Fina 2013) which follows, as well as the methodological implications this has brought to bear on the project as a whole. The extract begins with Vit's response to an embedded question in the preceding discussion in which the researcher had foregrounded his confusion about why some tourist/local sponsorship relations are successful but why others break down. Vit had answered that some Cambodian young men have attracted a

number of concurrent sponsors and moves to construct a small story that explains how these men succeed in doing so.

4. Vit's narrative

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1.  V    …the young Cambodian err people
2.       they start to they start to find out
3.       that they can find an easy way to get money from the customer
4.  BR   //yeah yeah
5.  V    by telling them about HOW how difficult living in Cambodia
6.  BR   //yeah
7.  V    after the Pol Pot regime
8.  BR   umm
9.  V    yeah I think people still interesting
10.      what is the young Cambodian
11. BR   //sure
12. V    living after the they
13.      for the people who born after nineteen eighty
14. BR   yeah
15. V    so they errm when nineteen eighty
16.      when it's come to two thousand and ten
17. BR   //yeah
18. V    it's err already twenty years
19. BR   //twenty years yeah exactly
20. V    so (1) they they might be
21.      err interesting how these young Cambodian living here
22. BR   //yeah
23. V    and how they supporting their FAMILY
24. BR   //yeah
25. V    when they err get a job
26.      but earning very earning a salary from a job is very low here
27. BR   //umm umm
28. V    and err
29. BR   //yeah I heard
30. V    yeah and umm (1) sometime is difficult of the family
31. BR   //so
32. V    //of having a loan from a people other people
33. BR   //umm
34. V    or later on they have a big loan from the BANKS
35. BR   //umm umm
36. V    and err they using a lot of money for err LIVING
37. BR   //umm
38. V    err (1) sometimes they trying
39.      to get something nice for their family
40. BR   //YEAH
41. V    but err but they not earn very much MONEY
42. BR   umm
43. V    yeah but err young Cambodian people later on find out
44.      there's a better way to get a sponsor from the FOREIGNER
45. V    as a gay people
46. BR   //yeah
47. V    then (1) then they will do
48.      I will do the SAME sure
49.      that's what I say
50.      I will do the same if I have this opportunity…
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5. The analysis

Lines 1 to 3 form a preface to a small story through which Vit seeks to explain the actions taken by some young Cambodian men to secure sponsorship and is therefore the first step in justifying them as necessary actions. Vit refers to the actors in his story as young Cambodians, thus positioning them in a time-space that differs from that of the non-Cambodian, by implication an older and well-heeled "customer". The chronotope of Cambodian youth invoked here indexes not only a lack of money but also potential economic mobility; a transition from inexperience to experience as these young people "learn". Centring on this learned knowledge, which is "an easy way to get money", Vit brings this Cambodian youth chronotope into contact with the chronotope of the "customer", the economically mobile tourist. This convergence creates a new chronotope in the story within which this action, i.e. to "get money", can potentially take place; in other words, a chronotope of the city's queer tourist-local contact zones.

Having constructed this chronotope and the participation framework it informs in the story preface, Vit continues in lines 5 to 7 to provide an example of how the young Cambodians might approach the customer (tourist) using a particular narrative resource; one that is extremely compelling in its tellability. This resource is specified via the mobilization of a Pol Pot chronotope, an "invokable history" powered by the 'semiotic artefacts' (Lemke 2000, 2001, 2005) it contains – the 'Killing Fields', genocide, and suffering etc. It is brought into alignment here with the already established Cambodian youth chronotope of the present to explain their "difficulties". The affective impact this narrative may have on the tourist within the site of action, the chronotope of the contact zone, is spelled out in lines 9 to 25, as Vit moves to position the listening and attentive tourist in the story as having an interest in the lives of Cambodian people, given their tragic history. For example, Vit's use of the temporal deictive "still" – "people still interesting" - in line 9 indicates his knowledge of the endurance of this chronotope in shaping the experience of the visitor. The prevalence of semiotic artefacts related to the Pol Pot regime on the Cambodian tourist trail (Koleth 2014) must of course be noted here. In order to qualify his knowledge, Vit in lines 15 to 19 crosses to the here and now of the telling to engage the researcher in a brief negotiation of the timelines that inform the actions of the story-world chronotope. This act of participant transposition (Perrino 2007), where the narrator brings the listener from the chronotope of the interactional text into the denotational-textual chronotope of the story, allows Vit to cast the white, male researcher into the typical role of the visitor, one who has knowledge of Cambodia's past. This position is acknowledged by the researcher who confirms Vit's interpretation of the timeline and his own understanding of it in line 19. The brief co-construction of events here therefore succeeds as a cross-chronotopic alignment (Perrino 2007; Agha 2006) that renders Vit's story and the typical actors and actions that take place within it mutually intelligible.

In this way, Vit demonstrates his, and the young Cambodians he gives voice to in the story, socio-pragmatic knowledge of how this chronotope of the past is relevant to the visitor (the role the researcher is assigned in the story and the tale worlds) and thus how it can be shared. While the impact of the Pol Pot chronotope on present lived experience obviously differs

between the young Cambodian and the tourist, Vit makes clear that its invocation at this site of action creates mutual understanding through an intersection of knowledges, of how the past defines the present in this contact zone. This effect therefore leads to a positioning and characterization of the visitor in the chronotope of the contact zone as someone who is interested in and concerned about the lives of young Cambodians who need to support themselves and their families. The chronotopic alignment of past and present continues to shape the ongoing story in lines 25 to 41 as Vit describes the impact the past continues to have on the lives of young Cambodians. This effect is again through a deployment of a Cambodian youth chronotope in the story world that indexes poverty and financial struggle as he lists a series of problems - those of low salaries and debt. The researcher, fulfilling the roles that have been already cast for him through cross-chronopotic alignment as both an interactant and representative visitor, sustains his understanding of the chronotope of Cambodian youth throughout this listing of hardships by indicating his knowledge in line 29 – "yeah, I heard" - and then via a series of affirmatory minimal responses.

In lines 43-45, Vit re-orients to his story preface, and so to the transition from inexperience to experience he had previously addressed, as young Cambodians "later on find out there's a better way to get a sponsor from the foreigner as a gay people". While the foreigners in this story are positioned with recourse to their sexual identities as gay men, given that they are typified participants in the chronotope of the story world that takes place in the queer spaces of the city, it is not clear whether Vit also means that the young Cambodians in his story identify as gay. However, sexual desire on the part of the Cambodians does not appear to be very relevant here. In fact, the various chronotopes that have been invoked in this small story do not index identity-based sexual desires or practices at all, although one could say that these have been tacit throughout the telling of the story. In the chronotope constructed to explain the actors and actions in this story and beyond, what is more important is the "opportunity" for sponsorship, or economic support, that the young Cambodians can agentically seize upon – "they will do" as Vit emphasises in lines 47 to 50, and he "will do the same".

6. Discussion

The analysis of chronotopic interplay in Vit's short story not only draws attention to a number of issues that relate to current understandings of mobility, but also affords us the opportunity to expand on them. This is because, in contrast to the mobile populations, traversing nations and identities, that provide the focus for the vast majority of language and mobility studies, the people in this study, those "who have not moved and who may not ever move" (Dick 2010: 277), are confronted with the mobility of others; i.e. the tourists who pass through Cambodia's queer spaces. It is, however, with respect to these peoples' chronotopic awareness of others' mobilities, and the various higher-scale knowledges that these mobilities index, that the potential for action emerges. In this way, and as Vit's story has indicated, these young Cambodian men are able to metapragmatically draw on their awareness of how, for example, visitors will bring with them a knowledge of recent Cambodian history and its ongoing repercussions (i.e. the poverty and hardships), to make intelligible, and more importantly, justify their need for economic support. As such, the chronotope constructed by Vit in his story, where sponsorship arrangements are negotiated between locals and gay tourists, informs the discursive and semiotic means by which

historical artefacts are put to use towards redefining both present and future actions (Lempert and Perrino 2007).

In line with the above, we therefore see aspects of the Cambodian young men's mobility in how they are able to capitalize on their characterological positions assigned by the chronotopes deployed in this story. These positions are the marginalized, the immobile, the poor, and the needy; positions that fit the chronotopic framing of their histories and experiences in the discourse. In this respect, these positions also become relevant through a broader invocation of North/South temporalities, those of the developed versus the undeveloped. These are larger-scale temporal and ideological orders that tend to occur in combination or as pairs (Lempert and Perrino 2007; Irvine 2004). While, as stated above, we wish to avoid recourse to such binaries in our interpretation of sponsorship practices, given that they often lead, via static forms of contextualisation, to essentialising practices (Milani 2014; Milani and Lazar 2017), it is clear that the participants in this study are operating with a knowledge of these paired scales and their typified position within them. It is therefore through a mobilization of this position, formed in tandem with their life experiences and where Northern NGOs and their staff govern the majority of opportunities for social and personal development in Cambodia, that tourist/local sponsorship arrangements are made to make sense. Consequently, these young men are able to perform identities via enregistered positions of marginalization and immobility that rely on the discursive deployment of chronotopic intersections and alignments in interaction with the visitor; a performance that can impact the successful negotiation of sponsorship arrangements.

The question that remains however, and one that, as mentioned above, is tacit throughout Vit's small story, is how sexualities play a part in these arrangements. The chronotope that Vit constructs is anchored in the contact zone of the city's queer spaces. The transactional negotiations he voices take place between young Cambodians and gay tourists and are thus mediated by the affordances these spaces create, that is by bringing the two parties together. However, same-sex desire on the part of the Cambodian men is conspicuous by its absence in Vit's telling. In fact, we are left wondering whether some of the sponsored men do desire people of the same sex and whether some do not. Although the chronotope assumes same-sex attraction or at least affinity, the main driver in this story is the sponsorship opportunity. It is first and foremost about striving for economic mobility in the face of difficult circumstances. In the end, this absence of reference to sexual desire serves to reinforce the agency of the sponsored men rather than detracting from it. In other words, higher-scale global chronotopes, and their ideologies that govern or enforce sexual identities and practices, are less powerful here, as the position attributed to the Cambodian men in this story sits outside of these globalising sexual identity discourses. In fact, what is more important to these actions is the local knowledge that gay tourists are potentially a source of economic and personal support; a resetting of sexual identity in a new, locally relevant, chronotope; one enabling a new set of indexicals (Blommaert 2015) that typify the gay visitor here in a socially recognizable way as a sponsor. While we may seek to assume that what is happening here is a form of sex work, or at least affective labour, the dynamics of Vit's story thus force us to question such easy top-down categorisations.

In the light of this discussion, we return to our initial question regarding how a consideration of chronotopes may enable us to make socio-linguistic sense of actions undertaken in this

sexualised center/periphery contact zone. Firstly, through analytical attention to the co-occurring chronotopes in this story and the ways in which they are discursively invoked to provide justification for same-sex sponsorship arrangements, we have been able to go some way towards unpacking the complexities surrounding these actions. This is mainly with respect to how these actions are constructed here through the deployment of chronotopes as entanglements of metropole and periphery knowledges, thus allowing us to avoid a simplistic or essentialistic reading of Southern contexts (and sex work) in this case. Secondly, taking the position that chronotopes are mobile units of context that can be combined in discourse to enable new configurations and orders of knowledge, we have also seen how this process points to agency and awareness with respect to subaltern knowledges. The higher scale knowledges associated with a chronotope of the economically mobile from the North are thus agentically seized upon by the people operating here and reshaped to produce a local chronotope of same-sex sponsorship that mediates potential social and economic mobility. Taken together, these insights have finally led us to a position from which we can begin to consider how chronotopic theories, grounded thus far in metropole thought, might be enriched by this type of 'dirty' socio-pragmatic analysis.

7. Concluding Remarks

The contact zone that Vit fashions in his story as a chronotope of same-sex sponsorship brings to mind Fanon's (1963) 'zone of occult instability', which Fanon refers to with a focus on speaking and writing in decolonial/postcolonial contexts. This is an interstitial space within which language may be used strategically and creatively to metapragmatically engage with sameness/difference and power relations, instead of merely reflecting existing and enregistered identities (Deumert 2018). By taking a position that foregrounds this 'occult instability', or as Milani (2014) has termed it 'the margins', we may also be able to reflect more on the relationship between theory, method, and data with respect to globally Southern research settings and the social/language actions described therein. As Connell (2007: 207) makes clear, this is towards "theorising that is mixed up with specific situations". This is an approach that does not therefore seek to classify from the outside but "links theory to the ground on which the theorist's boots are firmly planted" (Connell 2007: 206). In other words, we are not looking for universals or all-encompassing modes of understanding but instead we are seeking to make use of multiple knowledges (i.e. theorizing), from both the metropole (the researcher) and periphery (the participants), that merge in the instability of the margins to make sense of situated action. The chronotopic theories which we mobilise in the analysis are theories that Vit and other participants would probably not articulate (cf. Boellstorff 2010). However, the analysis, conducted via a process of ethnographic engagement and reflection, has allowed us to link chronotopic theories in language study to the theorising of those who are taking action i.e. the people we are researching. Chronotopic theory has in this way been mobilised by us as researchers as a way of enriching our analysis, but we might also say that chronotopic theory has also been enriched through the 'emic' theorising (Boellstorff 2010) conducted by Vit. His small story, and the "pragmatic interventions in history" he voices (Lempert and Perrino 2007: 208) in its telling, thus serves to shed light on this zone of occult instability and the complex entanglements of knowledges and actions it contains. These are the entanglements between mobility and immobility and between chronotopes and agency that have emerged as relevant in both this analysis and this study as a whole. As such, these

are insights that may well have passed us by without the dirty socio-pragmatic perspective enabled by having 'boots on the ground' in the global South.

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