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‘The lines are blurred’: same sex relationships and the local practice of sponsorship in Cambodia

Abstract

This paper addresses recent calls in the field of sociolinguistics to engage more fully with the language of sexual transaction. In the case of this study, the focus is on transnational same sex relationships, locally termed as ‘sponsorship’ arrangements, which are formed in the ‘ethnosexual contact zones’ of Siem Reap, a major tourist city in Cambodia. Utilizing a positioning analysis of narrative accounts from local and non-local men, I will show how these relationships are discursively constructed across blurred lines between charitable support and sexual transaction. As such, I draw attention to the ‘subjugated knowledges’ that emerge from this analysis to inform the social practice of sponsorship as a local language practice. This is a local language practice that foregrounds the possibilities for action, made available through locally circulating discourses of opportunity, development, and empowerment, along with the sexually agentic subject positions formed through engagement in Siem Reap’s sexualised spaces.

Keywords: Cambodia; same sex relationships; sex work; language as a local practice; narrative analysis; subjugated knowledges

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Introduction

Recent discussion in sociolinguistics, especially with regard to gender and sexuality, has highlighted the relative scarcity of studies about sexual transaction, or sex work, as contexts of language use. However, as Borba (2016) has proposed, these contexts can be productive sites of inquiry in which studying the role of language in the accomplishment of such (trans)actions can serve to challenge our current understandings of power, identity, and agency, in addition to the commodification of sex and intimacy. In this paper I seek to address these concerns, but also to extend the inquiry beyond contexts where sex work is traditionally seen as taking place. In this way, the locally situated relationships in the global south I centre on here do not necessarily align with practices that may conventionally be considered as sex work. Instead they bring into focus the semantically ‘blurred lines’ between sponsorship relations as charitable support or as sex work, allowing us by extension to explore the ‘blurred lines’ between sex, desire, agency, empowerment, powerlessness and victimization made relevant in peripheral sites of contact. These are often the blurred or porous lines through which sexual identities, desires, and agency find saliency in highly contextualised social actions, but have not always been given sufficient analytic attention in sociolinguistic research on gender and sexuality centred in the global north.

The relationships explored in this study are formed in the ‘ethnosexual contact zones’ (Farrer, 2011; Hoefinger, 2013) of Siem Reap, a major tourist city in Cambodia, and are locally referred to as ‘sponsorship’ arrangements. The relevance of this local practice emerged and subsequently shaped ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with local men working in the tourist industry. The term sponsorship was used by many of these men to describe a type of relationship they can potentially form with gay men from the global north they serve in the tourism sector and subsequently befriend. This was discussed as an arrangement through which the Cambodian is able to receive financial support for educational purposes, or more material benefits from their western ‘sponsor’, in exchange for companionship or, as was often intimated, sexual intimacy.

In this paper I take a poststructuralist narrative approach to examine the social practice of same-sex sponsorship as a local language practice (Pennycook, 2010). This is towards an understanding of language in use at the interface of the global and the local (Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2014) that sees language in a mutually constitutive relationship with the localised social activities it performs, especially with relation to place, space, time and history. The analysis thus attends to how this local language/ social practice is instantiated across narrative accounts (De Fina, 2009) drawn from interviews with both Cambodians and non-Cambodians. These are accounts that foreground local knowledges, identities and (sexual) agency, but also reveal conflicting positions or stances towards this practice, given the ways in which it alludes to both locally and globally stigmatised acts of sexual transaction. Through a positioning analysis (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, 2013), I will address the significance of participant moves between the levels of the story events, i.e. the local practices of sponsorship they describe, and the interactive telling of the account through which they manage their own positions and stances with relation to this practice. These show definitions of sponsorship arrangements to be highly contentious as they straddle the aforementioned blurred lines between charitable support, friendship, intimacy, and sexual transaction. I also focus on a further

positioning level by conducting this analysis from a ‘middle ground’ perspective (De Fina, 2013). In other words, I am making use of ethnographic insights to pay attention to how participants in these instances of interaction establish commonalities towards the constitution of this local language practice by invoking discourses that are made relevant regarding certain sociohistorical processes, local and global moral orders, and material conditions in this setting. This will assist in revealing how sponsorship relations and sponsor/recipient identities are on the one hand justified through linguistic resources that draw upon circulating discourses of development, education and empowerment, but on the other through those which foreground same-sex desires and sexual transaction. In this local language practice, both of these aspects to sponsorship are often seen to conflate as a result of the uptake of powerful subject positions made possible within this transnational, ethnosexual contact zone.

Importantly, I also seek to position this study towards an understanding of the subjugated knowledges that inform the language practices required to take advantage of opportunities in peripheral, underexplored zones of contact such as this one. Subjugated knowledges are described by Foucault (1980: 82) as being a ‘particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge’, or as ‘naïve knowledges located low down the hierarchy’. These are knowledges that have all too often been eclipsed by assumptions or overarching narratives made in collusion with globally unifying systems of knowledge production, and in the case of language, gender and sexuality, both (western) heteronormative and homonormative social standards. I have therefore aimed to situate my research in the ‘margins’, an uncomfortable ‘grey area’ of uncertainty, allowing these subjugated knowledges to emerge and potentially ‘speak back’ to the centre, thereby opening up a space for considered and critical reflection (cf. Appleby, 2009; Milani, 2014). In this way, I hope to provide a nuanced account of the local knowledges that surface from my analysis of this local language practice, by drawing attention to the porous lines made relevant in participant narratives between sex, agency, complicity, empowerment, and powerlessness. This is most significantly with respect to the complexities through which same sex sponsorship practices have emerged as a social action at this particular intersection of the global North and South.

Background and review

Research on sex work has its roots in feminist scholarship that tended to approach the topic from two contrasting positions. On the one hand, (female) sex work was seen as the apotheosis of the ongoing patriarchal oppression of women’s bodies and subjectivities. On the other, the selling of sexual services was seen in terms of empowerment, as it fostered the sex worker’s agency and control over sexual interactions towards the mutual satisfaction of all involved (Borba, 2016). However, these two extreme positions have been criticised as being one dimensional and essentialising (Weitzer, 2009). More recent scholarship has thus sought to understand sex work along a continuum of oppression and empowerment (Sanders, 2005). In this way, it has recognised the importance of attending to the situated intricacies of sex work on the micro level and the ways in which these intricacies constitute and are constituted by macro discursive forces, for example globalisation, and neoliberalism (Borba, 2016). With respect to

this, there has been a clear need to attend to the highly contextualised language practices through which such transactions are accomplished.

Previous studies that focus on sexual transaction in tourist sites of the global south have adopted similar positions to those outlined above. At the one extreme, they have approached sex work in terms of its ‘problems’, for example exploitation, the spread of HIV, and human trafficking (see chapters in Bauer & McKercher, 2003; Ryan & Hall, 2001). However other research has begun to problematise these enduring narratives. For example, De Lind van Wijngaarden (2015) presents first person accounts of young, rural Thai men’s agentic desires to find a long term western partner through opportunities presented by sex work, who will support them and their families. In these cases he draws attention to how these men construct their ways of thinking by valuing their sexuality as a commodity that should not be wasted in their pursuit of social and economic mobility. Collins (2009) presents alternative perspectives by examining the experiences of western gay expatriates in the Philippines and their relationships with local men through the lens of homonormativity. Engaging in transactional sexual encounters, often with straight-identified locals is for these men a disruption of their homonormative understandings of being gay. This, she explains, is an understanding that is based on an ‘identity-defined relationship between two consenting and ‘out’ adult men based on desire and not money’ (486). In order to confront this disruption, the gay male expatriates she spoke to are seen to renegotiate these transactional sexual experiences in terms acceptable to them. Finally, in the Cambodian context, Hoefinger (2013) sought to challenge discourses of exploitation and victimization by focusing on the agency of women working in bars in Phnom Penh, whom she refers to as ‘professional girlfriends’. Through their performance of loving relationships with western tourists in exchange for gifts and money, they are seen to reap the benefits of both financial gain and social mobility. However more importantly, by challenging gendered double standards, these women often become ‘proud patrons and providers for their families’ (7). All of these studies remind us of how the practices they focus on cannot simply be considered as sexual transactions or even sex work in the narrow sense it has often been defined. In addition, by confronting normative discourses of sexual transaction, these studies have opened up new sites for further research and reflection. In this paper, I thus anticipate contributing more to our understandings of such practices through a focus on the (subjugated) knowledges that inform local English language practice as social action in this peripheral zone of transnational sexualised contact.

The study: research setting, approach and participants

As stated above, this study took place in Siem Reap, Cambodia, which is perhaps best known as being the gateway city to the temples of Angkor, a UNESCO world heritage site. Because of this, the city is visited by an immense number of tourists each year. The tourist industry is therefore the main means of employment for locals, many of whom have migrated from surrounding towns and villages to make a living from serving visitors in various capacities. In partial fulfilment of the ‘middle ground’, ethnographic perspective I am adopting with regard to the language practices in this paper, I draw attention to two aspects of the touristic landscape

of Siem Reap, as I observed it. The first is the considerable presence of services targeted towards the gay male visitor.

Although Cambodia was described by local participants in this study as a socially conservative country, a commercial scene has developed that encompasses a constellation of exclusively gay (male) hotels, gay-friendly guesthouses, gay-friendly guides and drivers, bars, massage salons and spas. These are sexualised spaces where male visitors come into contact with the locals, generally young men, who have had to develop the English language (and other) competencies to serve them. In this way, Siem Reap's gay scene can be seen to represent what Hoefinger (2013) with reference to Farrer (2011) calls an 'ethnosexual contact zone'; a zone where individuals look for sexual contact across ethnic boundaries. On the face of it, an observation such as this may foreground this zone as a space for sexual consumption and link it to practices of sex tourism. These are globally prevalent imaginings of spaces in the global south where the sex trade has become the focal feature of the place (Brennan, 2004). In my own experiences of Siem Reap's gay spaces, it became clear that 'sex for sale' was an established practice, albeit one that was positioned as contravening local moral codes of conduct. However, beyond this surface reading and through numerous conversations I had with self-identified gay locals and western residents, participant knowledges began to emerge of how transactional same sex relationships formed in this contact zone could also be constructed in very different terms. These are local knowledges that directly relate to the second aspect of the touristic landscape of Siem Reap.

Besides the trappings that fulfil the visitor's pursuit of pleasure, another industry targeted at visitors is revealed in the ubiquitous presence of NGOs in the city. Most tourists, by visiting such places as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum or Landmine Museum, will be aware of Cambodia's recent history of mass murder and civil war, and the devastating impact it had on the lives of citizens. As a result, the presence of NGOs throughout the city serves as an enduring reminder of the social problems still facing Cambodia in their work to alleviate poverty, provide better access to education, and empower locals. Drawing on discourses of development, education, and opportunity, NGOs encourage visitors to contribute to their work through donations and volunteer activities. For example, on café and restaurant tables I often found informative notices that directed me towards the various ways I could 'help' improve the lives of locals. This type of emotional solicitation is manifested in other ways. The hotel I usually stayed at during my fieldwork visits runs a 'sponsorship' program in which guests are invited to contribute to a fund that pays for hospitality courses or English lessons. However, beyond this more institutionalised practice of support, conversations with locals, visitors, and non-local residents, indicated that this was also constructed as an individual practice. In this way, it was claimed (and experienced at first hand by the researcher) that some local men were deliberately targeting gay male western visitors, and vice versa, towards the establishment of personal 'sponsorship' arrangements. In presenting these two aspects of the touristic landscape in Siem Reap, I therefore seek to show how they can be viewed as converging to mutually constitute the discursive conditions of possibility (Kramsch, 2015) for same sex sponsorship practices to take place in this setting. These local conditions, as I will demonstrate in my analysis, are constantly

‘relocalized’ (Pennycook, 2010) as a high stakes local language practice that foregrounds powerful subject positions that can be mobilised towards the formation of these relationships.

The conversations, observations and interviews I conducted for this project form a broader narrative backdrop of stories concerning the practice under discussion. The people whom I interviewed for this project, both local and non-local were identified during ethnographic fieldwork for their English language competence and as knowledgeable participants with relation to this practice. They were interviewed on multiple occasions over the course of three extended fieldwork trips to Siem Reap at the gay-friendly hotel I was using as my base. Their narratives, as employees, managers, and owners of gay-friendly establishments in Siem Reap served to substantiate my growing awareness of how sponsorship practices occupy a defining role in many of the relationships established between locals and visitors in this ethnosexual and transnational contact zone. These stories also include my own embodied experiences as a researcher/participant in this contact zone where I, as a white, older gay man, had initially been positioned as a potential sponsor. As such, they work together in informing the analytical focus from a more micro perspective on the smaller stories (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) told by participants as accounts. Narrative accounts are seen as emerging from the context of research interviews as ‘speech events’ (Talmy, 2010), usually in response to a question or comment, and as small stories, relate ongoing, past, imagined, or hypothetical events, but which also allude to previous tellings, or the deferral of tellings, and even refusals to tell (De Fina, 2013; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Thus, the brief narrative accounts I identify in the analysis are seen both as a function of the interactive engagement (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) and important sites of discursive work with regard to actions and stances concerning the local language practices that constitute and are constituted by knowledge of and engagement in same sex sponsorship.

Positioning analysis

The accounts or small stories analysed here are taken from interview extracts conducted in English with three Cambodians and two non-Cambodian self-identified gay males, all residents of Siem Reap¹, and have been selected to draw attention to the ‘blurred lines’ through which same sex sponsorship is discursively constructed. With an analytical focus on how participant subjectivities, agency, and stance-taking work together in constituting sponsorship as a local language practice, I have opted to conduct a positioning analysis of these accounts (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; De Fina, 2013). This type of analysis concentrates on how people make relevant certain subject positions and position others according to the interplay between three levels of the storied account. These three positioning levels relate to: 1) the characters and events of the story world, 2) the interaction or telling of the story, and 3) broader ways of thinking circulating in the research setting.

A positioning analysis of narrative accounts aligns with poststructuralist research perspectives in that it can highlight how aspects of self are brought about in the communicative event through both narrative means and broader discourses to achieve certain actions or effects. Likewise, identifying agency through a positioning analysis concerns both the relationship and tensions between ‘epistemic’ and ‘agentic’ selves (Schiffrin, 1996). Epistemic selves refers to how we present our ‘beliefs, feelings, or wants’, and agentic selves appear, ‘when we report

actions directed towards goals, including actions that have an effect on others' (194). In other words, accounts of actions taken in the story world work in tandem with the performance of an epistemic image of self through the interactive event of narrating. This presentation of both selves is revealed in these accounts where participants are seen to (co-)construct stances (Dubois, 2007) and identities through a combination of various strategies. These include the use of reported speech, alternating remarks between the story world and the non-story world, tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) and 'authorial shaping' of the narrative (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

With relation to the presentation of agentic selves in these accounts, the above strategies may be used by narrators to both emphasise and downplay their own role, participation, and responsibility in the actions of the social worlds they describe (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). A positioning analysis is thus well suited to exploring how, in these narrative cases, sponsorship practices constitutes a local language practice in this setting in addition to examining the porous lines through which same sex sponsorship is discursively constructed. This is through attention to participants' deployment of narrative and linguistic devices at the first two positioning levels, along with recourse to local understandings or knowledges at the third positioning level. Together these inform a local definition of this practice and its salience as a form of action in the social arena these men inhabit.

Stories of sponsorship

The first analysis comes from an interview with a local man, Seyhakmony (all names are pseudonyms), and serves as a brief introduction to the relevance of sponsorship in this local context, and to the ways in which local knowledges surrounding this practice are discursively constructed in this instance. Seyhakmony is in his late twenties and self-identifies as gay. He previously worked in a gay-friendly hotel in Siem Reap where his accounts revealed that he met a western male visitor who was staying there. He formed a relationship with this man who agreed to 'sponsor' him to attend a local university. He is now a full-time student whose living expenses and school fees are paid for by his sponsor. The extract below comes from an interview I conducted with him at an early stage of my fieldwork in which he made clear that his gay identity had allowed him to meet and establish relations with his sponsor.

Extract 1: 'I have the sponsor...he is a gays'

1. S: ...I talk with you now because
2. BR: //yes right
3. S: //because of because of ((laughs)) gays
4. BR: yes
5. S: yes ((laughing)) because gay (1) yeah I talk
6. BR //okay
7. S: yes
8. BR: what about not just me but others other
9. S: //yeah
10. BR: //foreigners
11. S: //other yeah because um (2)
because I have the sponsor:
12. BR um

13. S: yeah he a he is a gays
14. BR: oh IS he
15. S: yeah and I prefer HIM yeah (1)
to be my sponsor becau-
16. BR: //okay you prefer to have a gay sponsor
17. S: yeah because he is a err
err knowledgeable person
and he and he he like
err ecu-education (1)
18. BR oh RIGHT
19. S: yeah so: he sponsor me to get EDUCATION also
20. BR: //yes yes
21. S: yeah so I like him so
this sentence is RIGHT for me
I feel successful during err
22. BR sorry can I just ask
how did you MEET your sponsor
23. S err actually (1) err
I work here at the [HOTEL NAME]
24. BR: //um
25. S: and and then I meet him yeah
26. BR //oh right^
27. S: and he said he like my ATTITUDE^
28. BR: //um
29. S and he preferred to sponsor me yeah
30. BR: oh great
31. S: //yeah ((laughs))
32. BR: so you made a GOOD impression on him
33. S: ((laughing)) yes (1) yes...

This extract is embedded in a longer exchange during which Seyhakmony was asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements I had compiled based on the coding of pilot interviews. The statement discussed in this extract was ‘I feel success during encounters with non-Cambodian gay men’. Having established that his gay identity has afforded him the opportunity to talk with non-Cambodians, using our conversation at that moment as a fitting example of this (lines 1-7), I ask him to elaborate (lines 8-10). In this analysis I therefore draw attention to two short accounts in which Seyhakmony, ascribed and speaking from a gay subject position, reveals a local knowledge of how this position may result in the formation of such a relationship.

The first account appears from line 11 and functions to introduce the fact that he has a sponsor, and to relate how this relationship works. He begins by attributing his success with non-Cambodian gay men to having secured a sponsor – ‘I have the sponsor’ (line 11) - and confirms this in the story world of his account by positioning his sponsor as gay – ‘he is a gays’ (line 13). This brief admission also serves to establish a local knowledge, from a level 3 position and in tandem with accounts from other Cambodian participants, that securing a gay non-local male sponsor is an identifiable practice in this setting. Seyhakmony continues by emphasising his agency in the tale world of his account that he ‘prefer HIM...to be my sponsor (line 15), to which I interject with a question that seeks to clarify these positions – ‘okay you prefer to have a gay sponsor’ (line 16). However, despite his initial foregrounding of a gay subject position in

this exchange, Seyhakmony moves to construct an identity for his sponsor that significantly downplays the sexual aspect of this encounter. He therefore acts to reposition his sponsor as 'knowledgeable' and liking education (line 17), and in doing so succeeds in constructing a stance in the telling of his account that emphasises these qualities as opposed to sexual affinity or intimacy. He continues by attributing agency to this man who sponsors him, 'to get EDUCATION also' (line 19), shaping the discourse towards a continuing focus on his gay sponsor's belief in education, along with the implication that his decision to sponsor was made from a position of altruism rather than sexual desire.

Seyhakmony attempts to conclude this brief account by affirming his response to the original statement (line 21). However, I interrupt him to elicit a further explanation by asking how he met his sponsor (line 22). The narrative that follows functions as a recapitulation of past events (De Fina, 2009), and directly references the previous account where Seyhakmony speaks from a gay subject position in both the tale world and the telling of his accounts. He again locates the events of this short story in the gay-friendly hotel where he used to work (lines 23-27). He does not reveal how this sponsorship arrangement was negotiated but works to attribute agency both to himself and his sponsor in the sequence of events – 'I work here, I meet him', and 'he said he like my ATTITUDE', and 'he preferred to sponsor me'. The sponsorship this man confers is therefore marked by Seyhakmony in the story as a personal choice, versus the sponsorship he could have conferred on any other member of staff. The sexual desire that the gay sponsor may have had towards Seyhakmony is, however, left unmarked. The account ends with the co-construction of an evaluative stance between me and Seyhakmony in a level 2 position as I react to the events of his story with 'great' and by saying 'so you made a GOOD impression on him' (lines 30-32). This positive evaluation is affirmed through Seyhakmony's laughter (lines 31 and 33), constructing a position through which he indicates our mutual understanding that both his 'attitude' and gay identity have contributed towards his success in securing sponsorship.

Extract 2: 'Trying to show that they are gay'

This initial analysis has drawn attention to a local knowledge that reveals how a 'sponsorship' arrangement may be enabled through a shared sexual affinity. At the same time however, Seyhakmony has shaped his account with the intention of foregrounding discourses of education, development, and altruism, in ways that elide insinuations of sexual intimacy. This local knowledge surfaces again in the following account from a Cambodian man. Vit, like Seyhakmony, has experience working as a staff member in a gay-friendly hotel. However, as he made clear in our discussions, and despite his best intentions and efforts, he has not been able to secure a lasting sponsorship arrangement with a guest. The extract below is a response to my inquiry about whether many of the other staff members at the hotel identified, as he does, as gay.

1. V ...and some of the other:^
maybe trying to SHOW
that they are GAY as well^ but err

2. BR //what what do you mean SHOW: that they are gay
3. V err SOME of the staff I I see like
they trying to TELL that they are GAY
but ACTUALLY they are just trying to
be with the customer who have MONEY ((laughs)) (1)
4. BR ahhh: okay okay
5. V //example^ one of my err colleague
who come from [province name]
and he's [name] province next to Phnom Penh^
6. BR //um: (1)
7. V and: he's already married
but we didn't know that
he's married and with one
one one children
8. BR uh huh
9. V but he say that he's single^
and he's trying to be with the: customer
that err and err customer that (1)
want to support him for SCHOOL:
10. BR //um
11. V and want to support him for other things
that he want to do for his future
12. BR okay so kind of like a SPONSorship arrangement
13. V //yeah...

In the lines immediately preceding this extract, Vit, in answer to my question, discloses that ‘a few’ of the staff members were gay but then moves to expand on this by contrasting these gay staff members with those who, ‘maybe trying to SHOW that they are GAY as well’ (line 1). Vit attributes agency to these ‘other’ staff members who are positioned as ‘trying’ to ‘show’, or perform from, a gay identity position. In order to clarify this position I bring him out of his narrative for a moment by asking, ‘what do you mean SHOW that they are gay’ (line 2). Vit qualifies his explanation in the story world, as well as constructing an evaluative stance regarding their actions, by accentuating with laughter that the characters in his account deliberately perform (‘tell’) a gay identity for a particular reason – ‘ACTUALLY they are just trying to be with the customer who have MONEY’ (line 3). In this instance Vit uses the somewhat suggestive ‘be with’ to indicate the agentic formation of a same-sex relationship that brings with it financial benefit. Another knowledge thus emerges that decouples these staff members’ intentions from what may be conventionally understood as a reason for friendship or intimacy with a gay western visitor, based on a shared sexual identity or affinity. Vit proceeds with his explanation by offering, as an example, a narrative account of how this action has played out. He introduces the main character in his story as one of his colleagues who comes from another province (line 5). This positioning of his colleague as an outsider serves the events of the narrative in two respects. First, it connects in a level 3 position to this local knowledge of opportunity, through which participants have described Siem Reap as a place where money can be made through encounters with tourists. Second it explains the fact that the character’s marriage and family were kept secret from other staff members, and more importantly the customers (line 7). Vit again emphasises the agentic performance of his colleague who shapes his actions by foregrounding a particular position – ‘he say that he’s single’ – which enables him to ‘be with the customer’ (line 9). Vit, however, makes a marked shift in position in the events of

the account by transferring agency to the customer who wants ‘to support him for school’ and, ‘for other things that he want to do for his future’ (lines 9 and 11). Drawing on my own knowledge of how this kind of arrangement is often termed in this context, I proceed to evaluate Vit’s account by suggesting that this is representative of a ‘sponsorship arrangement’ (line 12), to which he agrees.

The account analysed here draws additional attention to the ways in which sponsorship is discursively constructed both as a sexualised practice between local and non-local men, but also through powerful discourses of opportunity. The unnamed, generic customer from a level three position is, like Seyhakmony’s sponsor, seen in this way as an enabler for educational purposes, but more particularly, and as emphasised in this account, simply has money (compared to the local). The potential benefits that these non-local visitors represent therefore indicates a local knowledge that justifies the actions taken by the character in Vit’s account to agentically seize on these opportunities. Vit’s stance throughout the telling of his account, however, serves at the same time to bring the veracity of these relationships into question. Although Vit is seen to use tactics of adequation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) to reason that the ‘customer’ can or should help the character in his story towards his education, he also highlights what he considers to be the inauthenticity of such actions. From his own position as a gay man, Vit appears to cast aspersions on actions such as these, where identity is decoupled from sex by portraying the ‘married’ character in his story as opportunistic. The next account from another knowledgeable Cambodian insider, working like Seyhakmony and Vit in a gay-friendly hotel, continues the narrative by similarly drawing attention to this obscure character of sponsorship as it emerges from the porous lines drawn between altruism and sexual transaction.

Extract 3: ‘It’s not a good way to sponsor someone’

This interview extract with Ratanak, a local man who self-identifies as gay and who had also previously expressed to me a desire to make a sponsorship relationship which would pay for his schooling, continues from a discussion we were having about same sex transnational partnerships formed in Siem Reap. Ratanak, like Vit, had questioned the genuineness of many of these relationships, which are often between an older westerner and younger Cambodian. His stance towards these relationships was clear as he said that these were not based on ‘love’ but ‘support’. In line with this perspective, I foreground the term ‘sponsorship’, both as it semantically relates to ‘support’ and as it was the term I had recorded other local men using in similar discussions – ‘why do some FOREIGNERS...want to sponsor some Cambodians’ (line 5). As I introduce this topic in line 3, I make a marked shift from the collective pronoun ‘we’ to ‘they’. This appears to downplay my own part in the construction of a unanimously agreed upon definition of ‘sponsorship’ and leave the floor open for Ratanak to contribute his own definition. In this way, the subject position I construct for Ratanak in eliciting his account is as a local gay man with a potential knowledge of what same sex sponsorship means in this setting.

1. BR ...um (1) um (2) this is kind of bringing me on to
2. RAT //yeah
3. BR //what I was talking about with some other people
about like we called it (1)
THEY they called it SPONSORSHIP

4. RAT //yeah yeah yeah
5. BR yeah (1) so I wondered you know (1)
why why do some FOREIGNERS want to WANT to sponsor
some Cambodians I mean (1) maybe you don't know
but if you had an idea about why
6. RAT //yeah (5) errrrr (3)
7. BR maybe if I
8. RAT //I think because yeah err (2) some they err (3)
I THINK that most of western peop-
western people they SUPPORT not with the money
they give that to SCHOOL//
9. BR //right
10. RAT they like to support in THAT way
11. BR in THAT way right yeah yeah yeah
12. RAT //and cause err
I THINK they they would like to help
that people from that LOWER level to the MIDDLE level
13. BR //um
14. RAT cause I think EDUCATION can help err
THEY think that education can HELP (1)
can help them to (1) to GROWING
15. BR um sure yeah yeah
16. RAT //yeah
17. BR which is TRUE of course it does
18. RAT ...yeah and yeah (1) but (1)
I I didn't I didn't hear
that err some people that give err
that SUPPORT to study in ANOTHER way
I at the moment I don't think so
19. BR //um
20. RAT yeah yeah but cause
they want to HELP
but if you SPONSOR but
it's another thing
if you SPONSOR new MOTORBIKE new IPHONE (1)
21. BR umm (1)
22. RAT new CLOTHES I think that is something ELSE
23. BR something ELSE okay
24. RAT //yeah yeah
25. BR so (1) the FOREIGNER maybe WANTS
26. RAT //yeah yeah
27. BR //something from the KHMER
28. RAT //yeah something from them and then (1)
it's not a good way to SPONSOR someone
from buying you (1)getting you (1)
what we call^ (1) like new
29. BR new THINGS^ ((laughing))
30. RAT ((laughing)) new things yeah...

Ratanak, after a significant pause for thought, begins his explanatory account (line 8) in answer to this question. He ascribes a subject position to ‘most of western people’ in the story world as not supporting with ‘money’ but instead giving that money to ‘school’. He also attributes agentic choice to these westerners in that they, ‘like to support in THAT way’ (line 10). I echo his words (line 11), co-constructing a stance with him in the telling of his account that shows I have understood that it is in that particular way as opposed to another. Ratanak continues

by providing a reason for this support in line 12, again by positioning the sponsors as agents in the story who want to help people progress from ‘that LOWER level to the MIDDLE level’ because ‘THEY think that education can HELP’ (lines 12 and 14). Here we see the first two positioning levels, including Ratanak’s own stance (‘I think’) again drawing on level three positions and local knowledges that relate to discourses of development and the benefits of education circulating in this setting. The non-Cambodian sponsor is, in alignment with the previous accounts, positioned by Ratanak as an enabler who can help facilitate this growth. I positively evaluate his account in lines 15 and 17 by emphasising that what he has said is ‘TRUE of course’. This allows me to co-construct with Ratanak a stance in the telling of his account that indicates I can also see the benefits of a sponsorship that focuses on education.

Ratanak then moves to add information that contrasts with his previous account from line 18. By drawing attention to the fact that there is ‘ANOTHER way’ to support someone, it becomes clear that Ratanak is at the same time tacitly setting up an evaluative stance towards this other way through distancing tactics, seen in his hedging throughout line 18. He continues his account by once again positioning the sponsors as agents – ‘they want to help’ – but proceeds by stating that this desire to help can also extend to the purchase of material goods for those being sponsored, which is ‘another thing’ (line 20). At this moment the position of the sponsor in the story world of Ratanak’s account has shifted to the generic ‘you’. The use of the generic or impersonal ‘you’ can also be considered as another form of stance-taking (Myers & Lampropoulou, 2012). This works to generalise the action or event which, at a level three position, suggests that Ratanak sees this ‘way’ of sponsorship as commonplace. The generic ‘you’ has the effect of confirming that many people, not just the interviewee, may tell the same story or have the same perception towards the action (Myers & Lampropoulou, 2012). He continues by moving out of the story world to again emphasise that this practice is in contrast to the one we had previously discussed – ‘I think that is something else’ (line 22) – and thus continues to sustain the stance he initiated at the beginning of the account. Ratanak does not elaborate on what ‘something else’ means, but the phrase is clearly euphemistic. I try to clarify its meaning– ‘so the FOREIGNER maybe WANTS...something from the KHMER’ (lines 25 and 27). The expression ‘wants something’ is, as in Ratanak’s account, used euphemistically by me, perhaps owing to the delicate nature of what we are discussing. However, he immediately signals he has understood my meaning by agreeing and repeating my words in line 28. Ratanak’s stance as he shifts between the telling and the events of his account culminates in an explicit statement of disapproval – ‘it’s not a good way to sponsor someone’ by buying ‘new things’ (line 28). I evaluate Ratanak’s account through laughter which he reciprocates, therefore aligning myself to his stance on this practice (lines 29 to 30). Both Ratanak and I begin to foreground this more obscure transactional aspect to sponsorship in these accounts as a form of local relationship practice which diverges from just giving money to school or an NGO. This is euphemistically framed but works to demonstrate how sponsorship can be used to describe reciprocal arrangements in which both sides get ‘something’ from each other. In addition, the stance that Ratanak constructs through the telling of his account indicates that this practice can be evaluated negatively, according to the conditions through which it is defined. In the next section, I focus on the perspectives of a non-Cambodian, western resident of Siem Reap, the manager of a gay-friendly hotel, in which both sides to sponsorship again emerge from our discussion.

Extract 4: 'I don't see the benefits of that'

Robert has been the general manager of a gay-friendly hotel for a number of years now, during which he has seen many of his young male staff members leave soon after securing sponsorship from a guest. Apart from causing problems for the business, Robert had often expressed to me his disapproval of the ways in which these relationships are formed. The extract I present for analysis here follows on from a discussion we were having about this practice where he had stated that it is 'normal' to be sponsored here (i.e. in this context). I asked him to clarify what he understood by the term sponsorship at this point in our talk.

1. ROB ...yeah um: (4) look I'm (2)
we SPONSOR with the hotel
and I MYSELF I also sponsor people education wise
2. BR //um (1)
3. ROB that you SPONSOR somebody with the reason to
bring HER or HIM up in LIFE
4. BR //um
5. ROB because (1) there is (2) the FAMILY (1)
or or they have no FAMILY
6. BR //yeah
7. ROB err is NOT able to do so (1)
so you SPONSOR them with with the idea that
that person is going to USE
the knowledge that they create
mostly we we sponsor mainly err scholarships^
8. BR //um (2)
9. ROB use it to go UP further
10. BR //um
11. ROB //step and ACTUALLY (1)
to make the person self-sustainable (1)
12. BR yeah
13. R yeah^
14. BR yeah (2)
15. ROB and THEN you have SPONSORS or SPONSORSHIPS
that is GIVING (1) MONEY (2)
16. BR um
17. ROB yeah (1) and it can be MONEY
or even um material wise
18. BR //um (1)
19. ROB to PEOPLE^ (1) because (1)
they don't HAVE it (1)
20. BR um (1)
21. ROB and I don't SEE (1) the BENEFITS of that
22. BR //um um (1)
23. ROB personally
24. BR this is just CASH you mean
25. ROB it's cash (1) it is CASH or it is MOTORBIKE
or it is NICE watch
or it is an Iphone six or whatever
26. BR //um
27. ROB but GIVING them those kind of THINGS GIFTS
28. BR //um (1)
29. ROB what is the BENEFIT of (3)
GIVING something like this
that they don't have to WORK for it

30. BR //um (2)...

(lines 31 to 59 are omitted)

60. BR //so why why do people DO it then
61. ROB OH because they get OTHER benefits instead
62. BR //right (2) okay (1)
63. R yeah:
64. BR yeah
65. ROB and THAT is that is and I I I
I don't DARE to take the words (1)
well I am GOING to take it in my mouth
but that is for ME that is almost prostitution
66. BR uh huh um: (4)
67. ROB sorry
68. BR yeah okay (1)
69. ROB if you if you WANT to HELP somebody HERE
GIVE them let them go to SCHOOL (1)...

Robert begins his account with the discourse marker 'look', indicating that he wants to be clear about his position, or stance, on this matter. The subject position he assumes for both himself, 'I MYSELF' and 'we' in his capacity as the hotel manager in the tale world are as agents who act to 'sponsor people education wise' (line 1). As in previous accounts, a convergence of positioning levels is apparent here as he assumes the identity of a sponsor at the level of the events in the account, the telling, and the wider practice where the sponsor's role is to provide the necessary support and education for the less fortunate in this setting – 'to bring HER or HIM up in LIFE' (line 3). This, drawing on level three positions, is for people who, as Robert states, have no family support (line 5). Again, the use of the second person pronoun in a subject position throughout this account – 'you sponsor' (lines 3-7) – serves to generalise the practice, as well as allowing Robert to construct a stance through tactics of adequation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) by aligning this general practice to his own identity as a sponsor – 'I MYSELF also sponsor people' (line 1). Robert, in this account, therefore constructs a narrative, by drawing on an NGO style discourse of development, of a socially sanctioned and respectable sponsorship where the actions of non-Cambodians can empower locals to become self-sustainable.

Having clarified that I have understood this position in lines 12 to 14, Robert then moves to contrast this type of sponsorship with its more obscure character relevant to this local context – 'and THEN you have SPONSORS or SPONSORSHIP that is GIVING MONEY' (line 15). He continues by reasoning that this type of practice involves the giving of money or material goods to people, 'because they don't HAVE it' (line 19), again, positioning locals as disadvantaged. He shifts from the story world in line 21 to construct an evaluative stance towards those he sees as participating in this practice – 'and I don't SEE the BENEFITS of that'. The discursive separation of the tale world and the telling in this instance affords him the opportunity to make his position clear through tactics of distinction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005), with reference to his earlier account. I seek to clarify what these benefits might be, to which Robert responds, mirroring Ratanak, by listing material gifts (line 25). He sustains this stance of disapproval in the

telling of his account by questioning the benefit of giving material goods which the locals ‘do not have to WORK for’ (line 29). This led in to a long narrative of his own experiences where he emphasised that he was not from a rich family but had to work in order to buy things or go on holiday (lines omitted here). This narrative builds to a question I pose in line 60, to reorient the discussion back to sponsorship and to ask why people participate in this kind of practice. Robert’s brief response is to state that it is ‘because they get other benefits instead’ (line 61). In contrast to the selfless benefit of empowering their chosen local to develop through education, he implies that these people take advantage of locals’ desire for a better life in order get sexual benefits. This is clarified as he moves to equate this practice with prostitution in line 65. Robert hedges considerably in this disclosure through hesitation and discomfort – ‘I don’t DARE to take the words’. The caution he displays is significant as it functions to reveal a sponsorship that resists straightforward definition in this context. Robert, having previously identified himself as a sponsor, therefore negotiates an uneasy balancing act by drawing on both tactics of adequation and distinction as he moves between the events and telling of his account. He ends his account as an affirmation of the stance he has been at pains to construct by directly appealing to potential sponsors – ‘if you WANT to HELP somebody HERE...let them go to SCHOOL’ (line 69).

Extract 5: ‘The sponsorship thing is more...he’s my boyfriend’

I conclude the analysis with accounts from Christopher, a western owner of a gay-friendly business in his early twenties, which capture his uncertainties when asked to explain the practice of sponsorship with reference to the local knowledges through which it may be defined.

1. BR ...what do you um
underSTAND by sponsorship and
how that word OPERATES here (1)
2. C um I um: (3) I don’t know
it seems like it you can get very CONFUSED
between MONEY boy and sponsorship
3. BR //right (2)
4. C um (2) err: I know some guys that
like just get like a certain amount of MONEY
5. BR yeah (1)
6. C just sort of GIVEN to them MONTHLY
just to sort of BE there
7. BR //like a kind of STIpend^
8. C like a stipend: yeah
9. BR //yeah (2)
10. C and I don’t really know what those boys do
for their sponsorship
I don't know whether they’re LIVE in^
or whether they’re like BOOTY call
11. BR yeah:
12. C or whether it’s like: (1)
whether they act as like a (1) like a BOYfriend (1)
13. BR right: okay
14. C //I’m not REALLY sure like like

what what they need to do for their
 15. BR //to to keep getting THAT
 16. C //sponsorship
 17. BR //that that that money coming in
 18. C //yeah:
 19. BR right
 20. C but but I think like (2)
 the lines are very BLURRED
 with sponsorship and MONEY boy
 and I think that (2) they're (1) FAIRly similar
 but have SOME sort of distinct differences
 21. BR yeah
 22. C whereas a money boy might be like
 TAKE that one home for the night
 and sling him a bit of cash at the end of the night
 23. BR //yeah yeah right
 24. C //the sponsorship thing is more I THINK
 from what I underSTAND
 like a yep ((claps hands together)) he's my boyfriend...

Christopher begins by constructing a stance of uncertainty in his understanding of these local knowledges – ‘I don’t know’, and, ‘it seems like you can get very confused between MONEY boy and sponsorship’ (line 2). The term ‘money boy’ he uses here is a locally relevant expression that indexes male prostitution. He then proceeds by giving an account from a level one position that draws on his experiences about ‘some guys’ he knows who are given a certain amount of money monthly, ‘just to sort of BE there’ (lines 4 to 6). He thus constructs a reading of sponsorship in this instance where financial assistance is given to the local in exchange for companionship. I interject with the suggestion that this could be considered as a ‘stipend’, a word I had heard used by a western sponsor when describing an arrangement he had made with a local man. Christopher agrees and continues by moving between level one and level two positions and thereby sustaining his stance of uncertainty and distance from this practice – ‘I don’t really know what those boys do for their sponsorship’ (line 10). After suggesting that these ‘boys’ might be either ‘live in’ or ‘booty call’ (hook up), he also positions the locals in the story world as acting, ‘like a BOYfriend’ (line 12). This indicates, and in correspondence with Vit’s perspective above, that Christopher questions the authenticity of these sponsorship relationships by focusing on the performance of a boyfriend relationship that is, in his view, more likely to be transactional. I build on Christopher’s account by relocating sponsorship as simply ‘money coming in’ (line 17), co-constructing in this way an understanding with him that these are indeed transactional relationships. He agrees and references his earlier account by stating that, ‘the lines are very BLURRED with sponsorship and MONEY boy’ (line 20). These are blurred lines, he explains, that indicate both similarities and differences. Christopher ends by providing a brief example of what these differences might be at a level one position. He tells a short story of a money boy, positioned as a purchasable body from the perspective of a non-local in the story world – ‘TAKE that one home for the night and sling him a bit of cash’ (line 22). He then contrasts this, although shifting to a level 2 position for a moment to maintain his stance (‘from what I understand’), with sponsorship which is when the relationship is constructed in terms of

‘yep he’s my boyfriend’ (line 24), briefly appropriating and justifying the voice of a sponsor in his story.

This move between the two levels allows Christopher to uphold his distance from this practice but also to establish the emergence of a differential knowledge of how a sponsorship relationship may be constituted in this context. This is by drawing attention to how some sponsors ascribe a ‘boyfriend’ identity to the local they are sponsoring. Christopher’s account here allows him to suggest that sponsorship, although transactional, may be sustained beyond a single sex act. Here, a sponsorship arrangement is a way of justifying the transaction through the performance of a romantic or intimate relationship. He therefore suggests that this could be a discursive tactic used by sponsors to avoid confronting accusations of sexual exploitation (cf. Collins, 2009). Distinct from the previous accounts of other participants, Christopher does not define sponsorship through discourses of development or empowerment. However, later on in our discussions he disclosed that he had often been approached by potential local boyfriends who wanted him to ‘support’ or ‘take care’ of them; linguistic resources that draw on these discourses. Christopher told me that he was not interested in ‘supporting someone’ and had therefore found it difficult to meet a local man for a lasting relationship.

Conclusion

The narrative accounts analysed in this paper have been assembled to draw attention to how this particularly local social practice of same-sex sponsorship may be collectively constituted, or ‘relocalized’, through relevant discursive conditions of possibility as a language practice in this setting. Actions associated with sponsorship are thus seen as being relocalized in these accounts as a means of defining, forming, maintaining, and justifying transnational same sex relationships, which operate in this context across a spectrum of possibilities. This ranges from the act of helping a local Cambodian man attend school to arrangements which foreground financial support in exchange for friendship or sexual intimacy, as ‘boyfriend’ relationships. The positioning analysis conducted for this study has thus, in the first instance, demonstrated how participants have utilized linguistic resources in the story events (level 1) to characterise actions taken by sponsors and local men within this practice with respect to one aspect of this spectrum. These are linguistic resources that draw on, at a further positioning level (level 3), discourses of altruism, development, and empowerment. In accordance with the theoretical position that sees local language practice as a mediating level between instantiations of language in use and broader frameworks of meaning, sponsorship therefore on one level finds currency, I suggest, as a local language practice through Cambodia’s recent historical narrative and the presence of NGOs.

The powerful subject positions formed through these discourses are, however, seen to converge with (western) gay male subject positions made available through engagement in Siem Reap’s tourist oriented ethnosexual contact zones. The concurrent analysis of level 2 positions, those made relevant in the telling of the narrative account, has in this way served to underscore the ‘blurred lines’ through which sponsorship is defined across this spectrum of possibilities. The evaluative stances that participants have discursively managed in the telling of their accounts have served to reveal how sponsorship relationships are in many cases, and at a more extreme

point along this spectrum, synonymous with sexual transaction. Participants have, along these lines, sought to distance their own practices and epistemic selves from those who are assigned sexually agentic roles in the story world constructed with respect to pervasive local and global moral orders.

The analysis of narrative accounts from participants in this study has ultimately been tasked with investigating this social/ language practice from the perspective of emergent local knowledges, in which sexual intimacy sits together with tangible opportunities for social and economic mobility, made available in this transnational zone of contact. While a narrative of this kind of transactional practice, formed in disparate economic circumstances the world over, has often been attended to in previous studies, this analysis has sought to extend the focus of empirical inquiry through the theoretical lens of language as a local practice. This has allowed me to approach this analysis from an ethnographic perspective that sees instantiations of language use as radically situated forms of action, especially with respect to the discursive shaping and blurring of the local conditions of possibility that constitute these language/ social practices. This is therefore an approach that may assist in enabling local knowledges to speak back to theoretical concepts rooted in a sociolinguistics of the global north. This is a sociolinguistics that has often tended to overlook other, more obscure accounts of knowledge production. For example, the construction of identities and stances in these short stories, analysed through established sociolinguistic conventions, i.e. the deployment of narrative devices and tactics of intersubjectivity, point to markedly local and differential perspectives on concepts of sex, identity, desire, agency, and power. Further explorative focus on the discursive construction of these subjugated knowledges, and the peripheral areas of practice they shed light on, should thus continue to find their place in a field of sociolinguistic inquiry that aims to account for how constructions of gender and sexuality continue to inform diverse social actions through language.

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