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Opening up ideological spaces for multilingual literacies at the margins of the Portuguese education system? Ethnographic insights from a Russian complementary school

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Abstract: Eastern European migration to Portugal is a relatively recent yet significant phenomenon due to its impact on national legislation and discourses about language, citizenship and identity. Along with other migration movements to Portugal, it has also brought about changes in state policies. The monolingual order within the Portuguese education system has been reinforced through the adoption of the notion of ‘Portuguese as a non-native language’ and the creation of different categories of speakers of ‘other’ languages. While these discourses predominate within the national educational system, other discursive spaces (such as complementary schools and playgroups) are being constructed, on the margins of Portuguese society, where other languages and literacies are being learned and used, alongside Portuguese. This paper presents some insights from longitudinal ethnographic research (2004–2013) that was carried out in a complementary school for Russian-speaking children in Portugal run by their parents and grandparents. It looks into the complex ways in which literacy ideologies and practices were reproduced, contested and negotiated in this particular discursive space. It also shows how students drew on the language, literacy and semiotic resources within their communicative repertoires in different ways as they responded agentively to tasks set by the teacher. The paper concludes with reflections on the potential of the complementary school as a “safe space” for fostering flexible multilingual pedagogies.

Keywords: multilingual literacies, Russian speakers, language socialization and language ideologies, multimodal texts, linguistic ethnography

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1 Introduction

This paper draws on two consecutive research projects carried out in central Portugal over an eight-year-period: first, with Eastern European children of immigrant origin (Solovova 2006) and, then, in a complementary school for Russian-speaking children (Solovova 2013). Some of the results have been published elsewhere (Keating and Solovova 2011; Keating et al. 2014). In both projects, I undertook fieldwork that focused on the individual and interpersonal learning spaces of the children participating in the studies, and I sought to make connections between the language ideologies and practices associated with these learning spaces and the wider social and political context.

Previous research on education or language learning in Portugal, with a focus on young people of Eastern European descent, had either addressed their attitudes towards the educational practices in Portuguese schools (Martins 2005; Brito 2008), or it had classified their languages in terms of the potential ease/difficulty for learning Portuguese (Ança 2007; Silva 2009; Ferreira 2012). My research focused on: the creation of spaces for children from Eastern Europe to learn to read and write the languages spoken in their families; on the discursive conditions for the creation of such spaces outside the mainstream education system in Portugal; on the language ideologies and practices pervading those alternative spaces, and on specific, situated practices involving the use of different language and literacy resources that sustained their existence. Being situated discursively in-between formal educational provision and the family environment, complementary schools are often seen as “safe spaces’ where young people are able to practise and extend their linguistic repertoires” (Creese and Martin 2006: 2; also Conteh and Brock 2011). They offer a window into language and literacy practices that are developing outside the mainstream education system. However, because of being associated with a school-like setting, those practices may still bear traces of authoritative discourses about literacy. So, with this in mind, I would like to address the following research questions:

1. How do complementary school students develop their literacy repertoires? How is this process related to the learners’ own backgrounds and their views on multilingual literacies and pedagogies?
2. What are the ways in which specific literacies are performed and produced in the complementary school? Through what kinds of learning activities?
3. How do the students negotiate these learning activities? To what extent are their responses to particular tasks related to family histories of literacy socialisation?
4. What are the discursive spaces available for extending linguistic repertoires in the complementary school?
A discursively informed approach to linguistic ethnography helped me establish connections between: the children’s decisions about the production of particular kinds of texts and about how to engage in interactions with the teacher in different learning activities; between ways of engaging with literacy in their family environments and family histories of literacy socialisation. The analysis I present in this paper revolves around an interaction between a teacher and two students in the complementary school for Russian-speaking children in Portugal that formed the main site for my research. I focus on two multimodal texts produced by two different girls during this interactional episode; I describe the practices involved in the production of the texts and I consider the differences between the practices adopted by the two students with reference to their lived experiences with language and literacy at home.

The paper is organised as follows: In the next section, I outline the orienting theories for my research. In the third section of the paper, I give an account of the social, political and educational context for the research and I introduce the Russian complementary school. In the fourth section, I describe in more detail the ways in which I designed and carried out research in this school. In the fifth section, I focus on two students, the migration trajectories of their families, the language and literacy resources of different family members and the respective family language policies. In the sixth section, I provide a detailed account of one literacy-learning event – a dictation in Russian. I detail the technological resources employed, I examine the ways in which each of the students agentively negotiated their engagement with this activity, producing a text by drawing on their language, literacy and semiotic resources in different ways, and I consider the extent to which those differences reflected their own literacy socialisation and the language policies adopted in their families. In the final section, I then reflect on the role of the complementary school in terms of its potential as a “safe space” for fostering flexible multilingual pedagogies.

2 Orienting theories

2.1 Ideological and ecological approaches to literacies and ideological becoming

A child who learns to read and write ventures into an area already inhabited by various institutional and sociocultural discourses, where every utterance is filled “with echoes and reverberations of other utterances” (Bakhtin 1986: 91).
Biliterate children also “respond to the discourses in their personal, social, historical trajectories and temporal worlds” (Maguire and Curdt-Christiansen 2007: 53). People with whom the child interacts daily – family members, teachers and peers – all shape the process that Bakhtin labelled as “ideological becoming”. Schooled literacy - as writing which enters the public domain - is subjected to significant normative pressures, because “what may be tolerable in speech may be a symbolic issue if visible in chalk or print” (Hymes 1996: 69).

The child learning to read and write is socialised into the ways of conceptualising and doing literacy that are viewed legitimate and meaningful in a particular community. However, Street (2000) warns against drawing a direct link between particular languages and specific literacy practices: thus it would be preferable to speak of ‘literacies in Russian’ rather than of a single ‘Russian literacy’, to avoid suggesting that all Russian speakers share the exact same ways of writing and reading, regardless of ethnic, religious and class differences and regardless of the specific purposes of different kinds of writing activities. Indeed, my fieldwork in the Russian complementary school in Portugal has underlined the tension between different ways of conceptualising and doing literacy in Russian. Yet some of the activities and choices in writing and reading Russian in this informal school in central Portugal were recognised by the fieldwork participants as legitimate literacy practices in Russian, and led to the labelling of the school as ‘Russian’.

Being part of the broader social world, literacy practices are situated within the relations of power that shape this world. Inequalities related to ethnicity, religion, class, gender and other social categories underlie the availability and accessibility of particular literacy resources. An ideological approach focused on “the power relations that pervade literacy practices” (Collins 1995: 80) has been developed within the New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework. Within this framework, an ecological perspective on literacies (Barton 1994), and on multilingual literacies in particular (Hornberger 2002), has been particularly useful for my work, as it highlights the interrelatedness of individual, interpersonal, communal and societal spaces regarding the use of specific linguistic resources in different domains and the ways in which the use of language and literacy resources is bound up with processes of identity construction. Bourdieu (1991) also argues for incorporating a historical perspective into our accounts of the ways in which the ‘value’ of language resources is determined in particular linguistic markets, so as to avoid the illusion of equality, and to avoid painting a “picture of language as a universal ‘treasure’ in which everyone can partake equally” (Medina 2005: 117). So any attempt at understanding literacy resources and practices in Russian has to be situated in the history of the complex network of communities, institutions and
practices where literacies in Russian co-exist with literacies associated with other languages. Over the years, some of them have become more dominant, visible and influential while others have become more marginalised, even made invisible and rarely acknowledged as literacy at all.

2.2 Multimodal texts as semiotic and biographical objects

Each participant in a literacy event brings into the interaction around a text with others her own literacy experience – an experience embedded in the history of her family and social group. Guided by recent NLS research, we can view each textual product of literacy practices involving a child as “a multi-modal literacy artifact, situated textually and materially in the life of the child” (Ormerod and Ivanič 2005: 91–92). Its historical trajectory can be reconstructed through an analysis incorporating two perspectives on the text: (1) an analysis that approaches it as a text, reflecting meaning-making processes, and (2) an analysis that approaches it as a material object, reflecting physical processes of production. By analysing the child’s choices involved in the production of a multi-modal text, we can access the learner’s perspective, her previous knowledge, and we can start establishing connections with her social world. More recently, Sebba (2012) and Blommaert (2012) have also asserted the need to view textual and multimodal products as resulting from practices situated in the history of a particular social group and as semiotic objects. For Sebba, the “visual and spatial elements of the written form [...] are an integral part of the interpretation of the message” (2012: 2). Blommaert (2012: 1) distinguishes between the resources involved in the creation of a written message along the following lines, “from infrastructural, graphic, linguistic, semantic, pragmatic and metapragmatic ones to social and cultural ones”. He considers each of the dimensions of literacy production (e.g. material, textual, symbolic and social) separately and then in connection with other dimensions. This distinction helps trace the trajectories of acquisition, learning and distribution for each set of resources over time, thus throwing light on the writer’s biographical trajectories across the different dimensions of writing. Saxena (2000) provides a good example of such research as he shows how the history of beliefs about different scripts in individual Punjabi families in the United Kingdom were situated in the history of their region of origin, in India. Children also pick up on beliefs about the technological resources for writing within the family context. Thus, the parents participating in my research questioned the choice of specific technological resources for literacy learners in Portuguese schools (e.g. pencils over blue pens), and contested this by insisting that their children should use blue pens
for writing in Russian at the complementary school. This choice of writing implements turned out to be closely connected with their own memories of learning literacy in different schools across the Soviet Union. So attention to the use of different tools for writing and different literacy resources helped me reconstruct individual writers’ trajectories, along with insights from the interviews with parents and children, and with observations in local households and in the complementary school.

2.3 Writing in multilingual contexts: Family language policies and negotiation of identities

Parental attitudes towards ways of doing literacy and patterns of interaction around texts shape children’s literacy repertoires. In the households that I observed, the adults planned and monitored the forms and uses of literacies by their children, putting into action family language and literacy policies which had, in turn, emerged from the history of language policies and ideologies in their own family homes. Despite the leading role adult family members play in intergenerational transmission of values and practices about literacy, many scholars (e.g. Hornberger 2003; Kenner 2004; King et al. 2008; Blackledge and Creese 2008) draw attention to its complex, fluid, negotiated and sometimes contested nature. Complementary schools and family homes represent sites where “heritage values may be transmitted, accepted, contested, subverted, appropriated and otherwise negotiated” (Blackledge and Creese 2008: 538). Spaces for questioning and negotiating heritage values in literacy learning/teaching may be opened up as discourses and practices shift across generations, creating cultural and linguistic gaps. For adults, the move to another country may lead to changes in the prestige and status of different family linguistic resources, as well as in the practices and discourses of schooling and parenting (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). Moreover, mainstream school settings are often imagined as monolingual (Leung et al. 1997) despite the multilingual realities of many contemporary school populations. Ideologies of “fixed multilingualism” (Blackledge and Creese 2010), based on decontextualised representations of languages as fixed, bounded and enumerable objects, provide the basis of the widespread belief that different languages and literacies should not co-exist in the same schooling space/time. Informal settings like complementary schools offer potential spaces for more flexible ways of conceptualising multilingualism.

Written language is generally seen as more lasting and as a visible expression of symbolic belonging. i.e. “an act of identity in which people align themselves with socio-culturally shaped possibilities for self-hood” (Ivanič
In structuralist, modernist and essentialist perspectives on language and identity, literacy expresses a link to country of origin. In poststructuralist and constructionist approaches, processes of identification are seen as multiple, dynamic and as taking place within historically situated “sites of struggle” (Norton 2000: 127). They are seen as being negotiated interactionally at the interface between the self-representations of individuals and social positions discursively imposed by other individuals, groups or institutions. Multilingual repertoires provide speakers with vast and complex potential for meaning-making (Rampton 1995). The use of different codes, scripts and transliteration offer bilingual writers possibilities for negotiation of their identities that are absent in bilingual speech (Angermayer 2012). Separating codes/scripts, opting for language mixing or blurring boundaries between languages through transliteration not only index the ideologies and identities of the writer but those of the reader (Sebba 2012; Angermayer 2012).

The transnational mobilities and the processes of globalisation taking place in contemporary social life have been accompanied by far-reaching changes in information technologies. As a result, the use of multiple and multi-modal literacy resources is becoming common and more complex, and some practices are not familiar to parents. The new and emerging possibilities of online communication are constantly widening the intergenerational gap, leading to decline in parental agency and authority in literacy socialisation and even to a reverse form of socialisation, in which children are becoming socialisers for their parents (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004). The importance of tracing learning trajectories for specific sets of resources and of understanding their role in shaping multilingual repertoires for particular mobile groups of population is becoming more evident (Blommaert 2010). Moving in this direction may provide a means of shifting the focus of the sociolinguistics of multilingualism away from presenting immigrant groups as ‘homogeneous communities’ while offering insights into the complexity of literacy ideologies, uses and practices in a globalised and interconnected world.

In short, I bring together, in this paper, the NLS framework, a multimodal perspective on the production of texts (on paper or on screen), insights from the new sociolinguistics of multilingualism, research on family language policies and the linguistic ethnographic study of the negotiation of identities in multilingual settings, In this way, I attempt to provide insights into specific ways in which the literacy practices in this Russian complementary school indexed links with national origins and heritage. I also show how combining these theoretical perspectives gave me a clear lens on the diverse and agentive ways in which young people of different backgrounds respond to discourses about heritage and identities.
3 The social, political and educational context of the research

3.1 Portugal 1990–2013: A changing sociolinguistic landscape and new language-in-education policies

Well into the 1990s, Portugal was considered to be a monolingual nation-state (Pinto 2008). Most migrants came from the countries where Portuguese had the status of official language, while Slavic languages did not figure at all in the Portuguese sociolinguistic landscape. A succession of major geopolitical events in the 1990s–early 2000s—the dissolution of the USSR and of the Warsaw Pact, the creation of Schengen area, and the gradual expansion of the EU to the East—changed migration and mobility patterns drastically across Europe. From then on, migrants from states with no apparent historical links to Portugal started to arrive, from countries such as Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Kazakhstan. In 2002, Ukrainian nationals were the second most widely represented group of migrants, according to official Portuguese immigration statistics (Baganha et al. 2004: 98). Despite the recent decrease in the number of post-Soviet immigrants, they still constitute over 16% of the population of immigrant origin in Portugal. Ukrainian nationals remain one of the largest groups (Ataíde and Dias 2011). A sociolinguistic survey undertaken in 2004 across 410 Portuguese schools reported that 54 different languages were spoken in students’ homes (Mateus 2011:16). In 2005, the Russian and Ukrainian languages had come to be seen as “significant minority languages in education” in northern and central Portugal (Pinto 2008: 82–83).

Paulo Feytor Pinto (2008) has identified two periods in the development of Portugal’s language policies in response to changes that have taken place over time in the sociolinguistic landscape of the country. The first period, the African period (1990–1999), was characterised by an increasing presence of speakers of African languages and Portuguese-based creoles, especially in urban areas such as Lisbon, the capital city. The policy measures adopted during this ‘African period’ reflected a territorial approach: they targeted the “territórios educativos da intervenção prioritária” in Greater Lisbon [“educational territories of prioritised intervention”] and were implemented by schools, NGOs, and religious organisations. Being locally oriented, they proved insufficient for addressing the growing linguistic diversity in Portuguese schools more broadly. From the year 2000 onwards, a new, ‘Slavic period’ was evident in state language policy. This coincided with the new patterns of migration from Eastern Europe.
From this point on, we saw the formulation of new national education policy guidelines regarding provision for the teaching of *Português como Língua Não Materna* – PLNM [Portuguese as Non-Native Language] (DGIDC 2005).

Currently, children of immigrant origin are placed in Portuguese mainstream classrooms with children of the same age. Newly arrived students who speak languages other than Portuguese are introduced into a Portuguese language immersion programme where they are provided with extracurricular support in learning Portuguese as ‘a Non-Native Language’. The PLNM guidelines describe the procedure for distributing bilingual learners into language learning groups. Firstly, the ‘first’ language of these students has to be identified so that to determine its ‘linguistic distance’ from Portuguese. Local PLNM coordinators, interviewed as part of my research project, indicated in their interviews that this process of recording ‘linguistic distance’ from Portuguese and implementing these guidelines is very problematic, especially in case of creole speakers and students from multilingual families from Africa and Asia. Secondly, the guidelines call for documentation, for each bilingual learner, of domains in which Portuguese is used, along with the history of Portuguese language use. In addition, their proficiency in Portuguese has to be assessed with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptors. Finally, the learner receives a “diagnóstico” [a diagnosis], gets assigned to one of a number of predetermined “linguistic profiles” and is placed in a group in accordance with this profile (DGIDC 2005; Leiria et al. 2005).

There are 5 linguistic profiles in the PLNM guidelines, the first one being associated with native speakers of Portuguese. Another three are geared towards learners who have used European Portuguese or its creolised varieties at school or at home at some point in the family history. The fifth linguistic profile aggregates “speakers of languages distant from Portuguese” (Leiria et al. 2005). As a result, children of Eastern European immigrants, who speak Slavic, Romance or Turkic languages and write using Cyrillic or Latin scripts, end up sharing the same linguistic profile. So, the purpose of the PLNM guidelines appears to lie elsewhere. The PLNM linguistic profiles also distinguish explicitly between different contact varieties of Portuguese and urge practitioners to be aware of the differences between the Brazilian and European Portuguese, “especially in the written domain” (ibid). In local school practice, all non-European and non-schooled

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1 The linguistic profiles can be roughly described, as follows: 1-Speakers of European or Brazilian Portuguese as a native language; 2 – Speakers of languages distant from Portuguese; 3- Children of Portuguese emigrants who returned to Portugal (Portuguese L1 and Portuguese L2); 4- Speakers of Portuguese-based creoles; 4 – Children from other countries where Portuguese is an official language.
uses of Portuguese are seen as a problem within the mainstream education. However, teachers are encouraged to reconstruct, with the help of parents, the sociolinguistic history of uses of different languages in their students’ families. As indicated above, within the ‘distant languages’ profile, some languages are considered to be closer to Portuguese than others, e.g. Romanian as opposed to Mandarin Chinese. Differences between writing systems (e.g. alphabetic and logographic systems) are taken into account.

Being based on a ‘native language’ approach, the PLNM guidelines effectively promote assessment of ‘other languages’ in terms of their potential for leading to ‘errors’ in the use of Portuguese. In local school practice, such normative discourses are further consolidated through the use of terms such as “diagnosis” and “recovery” borrowed from medical discourse. In the course of my research, it was also found that speakers of languages other than Portuguese were issued, in some local schools, with a “plano de recuperação” [a recovery plan] adapted from the one used in special needs education. Thus resources associated with languages other than Portuguese were (and still are) constructed as if they were a condition that students have to recover from. These discourses and practices in education are based on “monoglossic language ideologies” (García and Torres-Guevara 2010:182). An excerpt from an interview with one of the Russian-speaking parents illustrates this kind of thinking2.

Extract 1  (P-parent; R-researcher; T – daughter’s name)

P – The [Portuguese school] teacher told me to stop teaching her [the interviewee’s daughter] Russian, saying that T had developed an accent in Portuguese.
R – Did she say it when she learned that she was going to the Russian school?
P – No, she h... I had told her that we were finishing learning the [Russian] alphabet with T [C1:203–204]

The teacher of Portuguese being discussed in Extract 1 apparently considered that learning to read in one writing system would undermine the process of learning a different one. The teacher clearly indexed her support of a monoglossic ideology and was clearly unable to see the ways in which these two learning processes might be complementary. In contrast, some of the parents interviewed in my study indicated that being literate in Russian helped their kids to learn to read and write in Portuguese or Ukrainian, and vice versa. However, in Portugal, initiatives supporting literacy development in Russian and

2 All translations from Russian and Portuguese into English are mine.
Ukrainian, on the margins of Portuguese society (e.g. in complementary schools, playgroups, in local newsletters) remain largely invisible. Their value is not yet acknowledged in dominant educational discourse in Portugal.

3.2 The Russian complementary school: 2005 to 2013

The data discussed in this paper were collected in and around the complementary school for Russian-speaking children in central Portugal mentioned in the Introduction. It was first organised by a group of parents and grandparents who had moved to Portugal from the former Soviet Union. It was originally created as an informal learning space in an individual home. Later on, together with a Ukrainian class, this informal home-based school was transformed into a formally-constituted complementary school for children of different ages (2–14 years old) with different national origins (Belarusian, Lithuanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh, etc.).

Every weekend three groups of children (about 30 in total) had classes in the Russian language, history, environmental studies, music, mathematics, handicrafts and drama. The school curriculum was determined by the parents and by teacher availability; teaching/learning materials were created by the teachers or adopted from different textbooks, including resources specifically designed in Russia for “children of compatriots abroad”.

The school never had permanent premises. It moved from one set of premises to another (e.g. a gym, a church and a local primary school). This had an impact on its literacy environment. The host institutions always dictated the ground rules: ideally, no traces of the premises having been used by the complementary school were to be detected by habitual users. So the complementary school teachers had to create makeshift displays and make sure that no traces of Cyrillic literacy texts were left behind. However, the complementary school students were exposed to texts and traces of literacy practices associated with the space owners (e.g. English class worksheets scattered in the primary school classroom, sports posters in the local gym, and religious leaflets in the church). In this sense, access to different kinds of Cyrillic literacy resources was limited.

Each complementary school teacher was also a parent or a grandparent of one of the current or former school students. At the same time, these were adults who were still learning to write and interpret texts in Portuguese and English, as

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3 All the ethnographic and textual data gathered for this research dates from the period before the crisis in Ukraine (November 2013 to February 2015).
well as exploring digital literacy and new media. As indicated earlier, the children often acted as intermediaries and experts in the use of digital literacies, helping their teachers and their parents to extend their literacy repertoires.

The families of students attending the complementary school were very diverse in terms of cultural background, citizenship status, social class, geographical area, and religion. Their motives for migration, their migration trajectories and their ways of life in Portugal also differed. The children were growing up in bilingual and multilingual households where Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian or Belarusian were used (as well as language varieties resulting from generations of contact between speakers of Russian and Ukrainian or between Russian and Belarusian). Khakass, Romanian, Polish, English, French, and German were also used in some families. However, despite the plurality of languages, language varieties and scripts among the participants, the complementary school was referred to as a “Russian school”. This predetermined the dominance of Russian literacy resources and practices. Elsewhere I have shown how the division between literacies in Russian and Ukrainian was monitored by parents in their children’s written homework for the complementary school (Keating and Solovova 2011). Parental control over the distribution of literacies in Russian and Ukrainian languages constructed a regimented social space within the school.

The school curriculum and the practices were shaped by wider language ideologies regarding the symbolic value of particular languages within the globalised economy. Russian, Portuguese and English were perceived as powerful resources for accomplishing social mobility. However, it was specific registers and genres that were valued rather than the languages per se. For example, legal Portuguese was regarded as a remote and inaccessible resource, and the Portuguese of school texts was understood to be challenging for parents who wanted to help their children with their Portuguese homework. English was regarded as an important resource for communication via the new media and for tourism. Some of the parents were actually taking courses in business and academic English. Russian was not only a language used with family and friends, but it was also associated with ‘high culture’, Internet-based communication and access to information sources. Besides this, some parents considered that knowledge of Russian could provide their children with opportunities on job markets across the post-Soviet geopolitical space and within the diaspora. In their interviews, they recalled how family members in Portugal had interacted in Russian with Russian emigrants in Brazil, France, the USA, Israel, and China. Despite differences in parental motivation for cross-generational transmission of Russian, most parents wanted their children’s repertoires to include Russian linguistic resources. In the last years of the fieldwork I undertook, the
complementary school managed to win a Russian state grant from the “Russkiy Mir” [Russian World] foundation. In this way, the symbolic power of the Russian language in the school was further consolidated.

Being able to read and write in Russian was considered to be a permanent and stable trait of belonging and an important mode of access to a wealth of symbolic heritage linked to a highly prestigious literary culture. Consequently, the written mode was closely regulated by the parents and some refused to acknowledge code-mixing in their children’s work as legitimately Russian. These parents appeared to be compensating for their inability to help their children with their Portuguese homework by investing time and effort in Russian literacy activities. In this way, Russian literacy helped to reinforce their parental role.

The families involved in the community of practice around the complementary school had been brought together by a number of factors: (1) their lived experiences of literacy and language policies within the Soviet and post-Soviet educational systems, and some were familiar with bilingual approaches to instruction, (2) their motivation to include Russian literacy resources in their children’s repertoires, and (3) their conviction that Portuguese had to prevail in mainstream education while their own mission consisted of keeping their home languages alive. In a way, the complementary school represented a zone of contact, in the sense defined by Pratt (1987): A zone between various schooling cultures and literacy ideologies, between formal and informal literacy and language learning, between bilingual and monolingual models, between traditional and new approaches to literacy learning. Being situated in-between various institutional frameworks, models of schooling and concepts of language and literacy, the complementary school had the potential to serve as a “safe space” (Conteh and Brock 2011), for the teachers and the students, for experimenting with multilingual literacy resources and negotiating multilingual identities, for building meaningful pedagogies and allowing for more agentive learner positionings. However, on occasion, the adults’ adherence to normative views of literacy sometimes constrained the potential of the school to serve as a safe space for these kinds of experimentation.

4 Research methodology and approaches to the data analysis

The research presented here drew on the tradition of linguistic ethnography project and it was based in and around the site of the complementary school.
aim was to trace individual and family trajectories through time and across
different contexts while, at the same time, looking for points where those
trajectories intersected within the setting of the Russian school and sustained
its practices. Different language varieties, registers, scripts and modes of com-
unication were seen as social, historical, cultural and political resources
deployed by different social groups for particular ends.

This paper draws on two cases that emerged from the ethnographic work: I
take a look at the literacy learning trajectories of Tania and Rosa, two students
in the complementary school, and the agentive ways in which they engage in
classroom tasks. These particular cases were chosen due to the close attention
paid to the management of literacy resources in their respective multilingual
families. I collected samples of texts produced by Tania and Rosa on their own
or together with their parents, I conducted semi-structured interviews with adult
family members and I did participant observations in the households and in the
complementary school classrooms. I also took photographs of the literacy envi-
ronment of their households and the school. In addition, I asked the children to
take photographs, and then I carried out photo-elicited interviews with the
children.

The research was designed so as to generate data across five different
sociolinguistic scales, where ideologies of language learning and schooling
ideologies were being constructed and negotiated discursively and interaction-
ally and, in turn, shaping children’s literacy practices: (1) the scale of the
individual child-in-history, taking account of the child’s own social history; (2)
the interpersonal scale, taking account of moments when the child negotiated
her identity as a learner while interacting with other people – family members,
teachers and so on; (3) the scale of the local social network and the community
of practice revolving around the complementary school, taking account of
linguistic and cultural practices and the language ideologies that circulated;
(4) the scale of mainstream educational institutions in Portugal and contempo-
rary schooling practices; (5) the scale of national language and education policy
in the context of linguistic diversity in Portugal. This multi-scalar research
design contributed to the building of a fuller ethnographic account and allowed
me to trace connections between scales.

The ethnographic work was guided by the key principles of collaborative
research: I endeavoured to conduct research with the participants rather than
about or on them. So, the interviews with family members were collaboratively
constructed and aimed at building a broad account of lived experiences over
time with languages and literacies within each family. The interviews were all
carried out in Russian, the language that the interviewees felt comfortable using.
I also noted down any resonances with my own experiences with literacy
learning in the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Russia. On the basis of the interviews, a case study of each family was put together. I then explored the commonalities and differences across families. This interview data provided an invaluable frame for building an understanding of the nature and significance of the language ideologies and literacy practices encountered during my observations in the respective households and in the complementary school.

5 Two students and their families: Migration trajectories, languages and literacies

In this section, I discuss the commonalities and differences between the families of the two girls (Rosa and Tania) who provide the main focus of this paper. The section builds on the collaborative accounts generated during the interviews and on ethnographic observations in their respective households. It focuses on the linguistic history of each family and the patterns of language and literacy socialisation experienced by the girls.

5.1 Rosa: Family origins in a border region, transnational migration and family language planning

Rosa was 7 years old when I carried out the classroom observations discussed in the following section. She was a very shy and soft-spoken girl when her grandmother first brought her to the Russian complementary school. Initially, she was so silent that the complementary school teachers used to think that Rosa did not speak Russian though she seemed to understand it. Outside the school, though, she was quite active and inquisitive. As time went by, she became a more active participant in the complementary school classroom.

Rosa was born in Portugal. She had, however, visited her extended family in Ukraine, in rural Bukovina, on the border with Romania. Bukovina’s language policies had shifted over time as the region had been contested by different geopolitical forces such as the Principality of Moldavia, Romania, the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Ukraine. Nowadays, according to regional statistics, Romanian speakers comprise over 90% of the population (IDSS 2004: 101–102).

Rosa’s family had lived in Bukovina throughout the period of Soviet rule and then during the transition to an independent Ukraine. Rosa’s mother Rita recounted as follows her experience of the language-in-education policies:
We had to speak Russian because we lived in the USSR; however, in order to maintain the Romanian ethnicity, we had been obliged to study our own language, so we learned history and culture in Romanian as well as the same things in Russian. [F1: 38–41]

So, for Rosa’s mother, Russian and Romanian were languages of instruction at school, and they were separate subjects in the curriculum. She had also studied Ukrainian as a second language, yet had no use for it at the time: “I’ve never learned to speak it fluently since nobody made us speak Ukrainian at school [...] we were living 40 km away from the Romanian border” [F1: 45, 51–52]. However, with Ukrainian independence came the obligation to learn Ukrainian. Nowadays schoolchildren of the region no longer speak Russian since they are educated in Ukrainian and no books in Russian are readily available. So, when Rosa came to her grandmother’s village in Ukraine, she had to learn a few Ukrainian phrases to communicate with her new playmates.

In Portugal, Rosa heard four languages around the house: Romanian, Russian, Portuguese, and Ukrainian, yet these linguistic resources were used in different ways by different family members. Rosa’s father spoke Ukrainian with his relatives over the phone and via Skype, while Rosa’s mother and grandmother discussed family matters in Romanian. The three adults spoke in Russian between themselves, with their Russian neighbours and with other parents from the complementary school.

My interviews and observations in the family household revealed careful planning around Rosa’s access to linguistic resources. Her parents and her grandmother wanted Rosa’s communicative repertoire to develop primarily around Russian and Portuguese. Ukrainian and Romanian were simply languages that she heard used at home. From an early age, Rosa had had a Portuguese nanny. According to Rosa’s mother, the aim was to “secure a better adaptation for Rosa to a Portuguese school” [F2: 79–80].

Literacy practices in Russian and Portuguese were also subject to family language planning. Apart from going to a Portuguese school, Rosa was taught to read and write in Russian at home and sent to the Russian complementary school, to compensate for “forgetting Russian” [F3:100]. Rosa’s father helped her with the Russian homework, and her mother with the Portuguese homework. Every night Rosa listened to a bedtime story that was either told or read in Russian by her father, or in Portuguese by her grandmother. Russian books for children were hard to find in their home region of Ukraine and in Portugal, so Rosa’s father made up stories or translated them from Ukrainian books. Once he had tried speaking Ukrainian to his daughter but “had to give up because Rosa had got confused” [F1: 21–22].
Rosa’s family move to Portugal had no serious impact on their social status in terms of occupation. The adults also learned Portuguese within a relative short period. However, even though the family members had good control of spoken Portuguese, they admitted having problems with “schooled Portuguese” whenever their help was needed with Rosa’s homework. Rita dreamed of sending her daughter to university and indicated that, with the move to Portugal, she had had that idea in mind. She also encouraged Rosa to learn English rather than French.

In her Portuguese school, Rosa was not the only child for whom Portuguese was an additional language, yet all the children spoke Portuguese between themselves. Her mother Rita explained it as follows:

Whenever I call the school and ask to speak to Rosa, she does not want to speak Russian and passes the telephone right back to the school assistant, as if she were afraid that someone could hear her speak in a different language. She does not want to be different. [F2: 16–19]

Being perceived as ‘different’ represented an important identity issue for Rosa’s family members. Her mother did not want the Portuguese teachers to set Rosa apart from other students in the classroom yet demanded they should be prepared to attend to her specific needs and adapt their expectations regarding Rosa’s academic progress. The Portuguese class teacher appeared to be ready to give Rosa additional support in the classroom. Having noticed Rosa’s difficulties with her Portuguese homework, the teacher suggested that the family should “pay more attention to Portuguese at home” [F3: 52]. Both Rosa’s mother and grandmother stressed that “no matter how difficult it may be to us, we are prepared to do anything so that Rosa does not stand out as different” [F3: 77–78]. They felt that due to the shared experience of outward migration among many Portuguese families, the country’s education system (unlike that in the Soviet or post-Soviet Ukraine) was much more child-oriented and prepared to help children with diverse origins. Rosa’s parents considered that support for their heritage languages should be provided outside the mainstream education system, within the family and in the complementary school.

5.2 Tania’s family, her mother’s views about language and strategies for supporting literacy learning

Tania was also 7 at the time when I observed a literacy event in which she and Rosa were participating. She was born in Portugal and lived with her mother Olena. Tania and her mother were very close and both were very lively and
outgoing. Olena had been brought up in a Russian-speaking family in Ukraine. Tania had travelled to other countries, and had been on vacations in Ukraine to visit her grandparents.

Before going to pre-school in Portugal, Tania had been cared for by Portuguese-speaking childminders while Olena was studying for her final exams in a Portuguese adult education college. When Olena enrolled at the university, Tania went to a Portuguese-medium kindergarten. Tania had also learned to read and write in Russian very early: her mother used to paste letters in Cyrillic around the house, and Tania was able to recognise and name the letters as she was carried around. In fact, when I first entered their house, I was overwhelmed by the amount of writing around me: the rooms were filled with charts, tables, poems, quotes and words in Russian, Portuguese and English, scribbled on scraps of paper, on kitchen and bathroom tiles, on the mirrors and even on the doors. So, Tania was growing up surrounded by writing, and most of it was visually organised in columns and charts. Other members of her extended family also oriented her to Russian literacy. Tania herself recalled sitting together with her grandmother on the beach, revising the Russian alphabet from a picture dictionary. She began to read using Portuguese books for children, however Tania was eager to learn to read books in Russian too. Tania’s mother had always wanted her daughter to read the books she had enjoyed herself as a child, to be able to discuss them together.

Just like her mother, Tania grew up speaking Russian rather than Ukrainian. When Tania went to Kyiv to visit her grandparents, she found that they spoke Russian between themselves. In Portugal, Tania and Olena used to sing in Russian on the way to school. Yet in her Portuguese school, speaking and writing in Russian was frowned upon by the teacher, who had suggested that Olena should stop teaching Russian to Tania and start speaking Portuguese at home. In contrast, Tania’s classmates had asked Olena to teach them a few words in Russian, and, upon learning them, eagerly greeted Tania and Olena in Russian whenever seeing them at school.

Having to rely primarily on each other, Tania and her mother had developed a secret means of communication to ensure privacy. Olena indicated that they used Russian in Portugal and Portuguese in Ukraine. She then explained that, in Ukraine, Portuguese served as “a secret language, because Tania [had] realised that nobody could understand us” [C2: 512].

Tania was also keen to learn some English. Apart from developing a range of communicative resources in Russian and Portuguese, Tania used and heard some English in games with her bilingual English-Portuguese friend, and in the films and cartoons she watched on TV. Olena had studied English at school
in Ukraine, having been educated in an elite school in the Ukrainian capital. She liked to practise English conversation and kept a poetry blog in English.

Once, on a visit to their house, I noted the particular way in which Olena communicated with her Ukrainian-speaking friends: they would speak Ukrainian and she would reply in Russian. Afterwards Olena explained that this was normal practice, at the time, on the streets of Kyiv and in institutions back in Ukraine. At her school, the Ukrainian language and literature had been taught as subjects in the curriculum, but Ukrainian was not a language of instruction. Everybody had spoken Russian during the breaks, so both Ukrainian and Russian co-existed within the school setting. Olena had learned to speak Ukrainian on holidays with her grandmother who was a Ukrainian language teacher and taught her “the purest Ukrainian” [C1: 127].

The way Olena spoke about languages set her apart from other parents in the Russian complementary school. She described language “as a social and living phenomenon” [C1: 33], and believed that people “learning another language grasp something from the culture expressed in the language” [C1: 36]. She stressed that the more languages people learned, the more cultural references they would acquire, and the wider their cultural horizons would be. She also expressed her view of language learning as follows:

Just as it’s natural for children in a monolingual environment to learn to speak the language of the environment, it’s natural for children living in a multilingual environment to learn to speak all those languages. [C2: 604–606]

Olena also felt that language knowledge could not be compartmentalised and that the learning of Russian and Portuguese were complementary activities.

5.3 Language and literacy learning viewed across the family histories

If we were to determine Tania and Rosa’s linguistic profiles according to the PLNM guidelines, both girls would end up in the same group: Their parents had migrated from Ukraine and had had the same initial status on arrival in Portugal and throughout their stay. Both girls had been born in Portugal and were being raised in families where languages other than Portuguese were spoken and written; their learning opportunities, as well as the ‘linguistic distance’ of their home languages from Portuguese, were similar. In other words, the PLNM criteria provide no way of distinguishing between these two young learners of Eastern European origin. Yet, if we take into consideration the fieldwork data from the two families, we can observe a variety of ways in which Tania and
Rosa’s family backgrounds and their own histories of language socialisation diverge. These divergences are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Tania and Rosa: Family language histories and lived experiences with languages and language ideologies in Portugal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rosa</th>
<th>Tania</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social and linguistic background of the family prior to arrival in Portugal</strong></td>
<td>Family origins in rural Ukraine – region on the border with Romania</td>
<td>Urban Ukraine – Capital city Cosmopolitan area – open urban-based social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Close-knit local social networks</td>
<td>Parent’s education – elite education, then university in Portugal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents’ education – vocational</td>
<td>High mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low mobility</td>
<td>Parallel bilingualism in Russian and Ukrainian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Series of language regimes imposed in this region of Ukraine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building a communicative repertoire in Portugal as a child</strong></td>
<td>Early socialisation in Portuguese</td>
<td>Early socialisation in Portuguese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experience of multilingual settings through travel</td>
<td>Experience of multilingual settings through travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family language policy geared to Rosa developing primary literacy</td>
<td>Literacy rich environment at home (e.g. words, charts, tables, blogs in Russian, Portuguese and English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and language resources in Russian and Portuguese</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language ideologies encountered at home and in the Portuguese school</strong></td>
<td><em>At home:</em> One person-one language; support for heritage language should be provided in the home and in the complementary school</td>
<td><em>At home:</em> One person-several languages; heritage languages can help in learning other languages; when travelling some languages can be used as secret languages; other languages open windows on other cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>At school:</em> A monolingual order – use of languages other than Portuguese positions students as ‘different’</td>
<td><em>At school:</em> A monolingual order – the teaching of Russian at home ‘interferes’ with the learning of Portuguese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 A literacy event in the complementary school

6.1 Doing a Russian dictation

The following extract is taken from fieldnotes that I took while observing this literacy event in the complementary school:
The Russian teacher had noticed that, when doing written work, her younger students had tended to ‘mix up’ some Russian letters with their Portuguese counterparts, as well as with other Russian letters. She assumed that this may have been due to: 1) the incomplete distinction between the Portuguese and Russian writing systems in terms of phoneme-grapheme correspondence, 2) perceived similarities in the graphic shape of some letters, or 3) the students’ insufficient knowledge of capital versus small letter sets. To check her ideas, she proposed that the students should have a dictation based on sets of capital and small letters. After the dictation she was planning to draw her students’ attention on the specific differences between the letters. So, having grouped the sets on the basis of their graphic similarity, both within the Russian and Portuguese writing systems, the teacher dictated them, pausing between the groups, expecting the girls to write them down on their own. They had all agreed that each group should be written on a new line. However, as she finished dictating, the teacher realised it had not all gone as planned. It has taken Rosa much longer to finish her dictation because she kept summoning the teacher’s help, and Tania’s version looked like a table where both Russian and Portuguese letters were written. (Fieldnotes, November 24, 2007).

Figure 1 below shows the texts produced by Rosa and Tania, while Table 2 (below) sets out the phoneme-grapheme correspondences and identifies similarities between the cursive Russian and Portuguese characters. In Table 2, the shaded cells indicate those Russian cursive elements that were part of the dictation.

**Figure 1:** The final texts of Rosa and Tania’s dictations.

**Table 2:** Cyrillic and Roman cursive with their phonemic values. (1-Phonemic value; 2-Russian cursive; 3-Roman cursive).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st line</td>
<td>/p/</td>
<td>Рп</td>
<td>п</td>
<td>/t/</td>
<td>Тт</td>
<td>т</td>
<td>/l/</td>
<td>Лл</td>
<td>л</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd line</td>
<td>/l/</td>
<td>Мн</td>
<td>М</td>
<td>/m/</td>
<td>Мм</td>
<td>м</td>
<td>/m/</td>
<td>Мм</td>
<td>м</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
In Table 3 below, the interaction around the dictation is broken down into moves, for the three participants, as follows:

Table 3: Interaction moves during the dictation event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>line N°</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Rosa</th>
<th>Tania</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st line</td>
<td>announces the format specifies the writing implements, i.e. that pencils should be used</td>
<td>picks up a pencil</td>
<td>picks up a blue pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dictates the 1st line: Tin Tm Rř</td>
<td>starts writing, confuses n and m</td>
<td>starts writing, confuses n and m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>pencils T in Rosa’s notebook to show the similarities with the 1st line</td>
<td>picks up an eraser, erases the wrong letters and starts over</td>
<td>crosses out m and writes n next to it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reassures Rosa of her choice allows Tania to write Portuguese letters “after the Russian ones”</td>
<td>turns to the teacher to make sure the letters are right this time</td>
<td>asks the teacher whether she “can write Portuguese letters as well”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd line</td>
<td>dictates the 2nd line: Ll Mm</td>
<td>writes the 2nd line</td>
<td>starts adding the Portuguese characters above the Russian graphemes in a blue pen (c, i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>confers with the teacher</td>
<td>starts writing the 2nd line, hesitates on М, writes again writes Мm</td>
<td>starts writing the 2nd line, hesitates on М, writes again Мm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>picks up a red pen, strikes out / in the 1st line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd line</td>
<td>dictates the 3rd line: Ун Ун</td>
<td>writes the 3rd line, gets Ун wrong, erases it, writes over</td>
<td>replaces the Portuguese / by / in red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>confers with the teacher</td>
<td>surrounds each set of graphemes in red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>writes Ун Ун, hesitates on Ун</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
6.2 The students’ texts: Resources and processes in their production

The dictation format is known to every school goer as a particularly rigid format for displaying literacy knowledge, which does not allow any move away from institutional conventions regarding the technological, graphic, linguistic, social or cultural resources involved in the production of the text. Due to the asymmetrical distribution of power in a classroom, the teacher chooses the material to be read aloud, introduces time constraints and spatial designs, and monitors their implementation. However, the teachers’ expectations regarding the outcome of a dictation are not always fully met. As evident in Figure 1 and Table 3, each of the participants in this dictation event had her own idea about the technological resources (writing implements) that were best suited to the task; her own idea about the necessary graphic resources (colours, textures for a spatial design) and linguistic resources appropriate for the task (depending on her available knowledge of phoneme-grapheme correspondences), and finally, each had her own idea about the social and cultural resources involved (that is, what the written genre of a dictation should look like). Decisions at each level of text production described above was subject to negotiation and some nuanced contestation, leading to changes on other levels.
6.2.1 The interactions between Rosa and the teacher

Since the teacher proposed the use of lead pencils instead of pens, this opened up the possibility of self-correction, although this contradicted the main purpose of using the dictation as a diagnostic tool. Rosa appears to have interpreted the teacher’s suggestion as entitling her to check every single group of written characters with the teacher. Rosa’s bids for help could be attributed to her lack of self-confidence and to her desire to comply with the teacher’s authority throughout the interaction. However, her bids for help ended up disrupting the flow of the ‘independent dictation writing’, breaking it up into a series of micro-dictations. In this way, Rosa managed, to some extent, to contest the teacher’s institutional power and to manage her own time. Thus, the change in the technological resource (the choice of lead pencils) contributed to a change in this classroom literacy genre.

Despite (or due to) the failure to impose her ideas, the teacher chose to remind Rosa of the specific linguistic and graphic resources to be applied. She introduced three sets of letters into Rosa’s text, one in pencil and two in a blue pen. The set of letters in pencil (Тг) had the purpose of focusing Rosa’s attention on the differences between П and Т, as well as between Г and Г, and foregrounding the Russian writing system. The sets in a blue pen (Бб Вв) reinforced this point even further, as both graphemes written in blue represent /b/ in the Russian and Portuguese writing systems, respectively. Finally, the teacher circled Rosa’s dictation, as if she were framing it on the page (as shown in Figure 1). Whereas she was generally unable to impose her idea of time management on Rosa, she succeeded in shaping the way the space was organised in Rosa’s notebook. Even then the teacher felt impelled to use a different colour (blue), and a more permanent technological resource (ink), so as to keep Rosa focused on the task and to reassert her teacher authority.

6.2.2 Tania’s recasting of the dictation task

When we turn to Tania’s version (shown in Figure 1), we realise that hardly any of the teacher-proposed choices had been taken on board. Tania reinterpreted the dictation task at each level, adapting it to her own needs. Firstly, she picked up a blue pen instead of a pencil, thus making her own selection of technological resources. Once the permission had been granted to “write down the Portuguese letters as well” (thereby extending the range of graphic and linguistic resources in play), Tania reorganised her work completely. Rather than matching the oral stimulus to the written mode, relying solely on the Russian writing system (as the teacher had intended), Tania included familiar
resources from Portuguese. While listening to the phonemic value of the dictated Cyrillic character, she noted down the Roman character that had a similar value and then wrote the required grapheme below it: e.g. “š” above Пп and “i” above Ии. Whenever she failed to find a readily available correspondence in the Portuguese writing system, she creatively combined familiar means to transcribe what she had heard: “ex” to transcribe /ɕɕ/ for the Russian Щщ, and “л” (/ts/) – for the Russian Яя.

These additions to the linguistic and graphic resources used in the dictation task required a rearrangement of the spatial design of the text. At first, Tania tried to write both Roman and Cyrillic characters with the same pen, then picked up a different colour pen (red) to write letters from the Portuguese writing system. In this way, Tania was able to create a connection between the Cyrillic and Roman scripts, as well as highlight her choices and distinguish between them.

Rather than making rows of letter sets, she presented her dictation as a table. Tania’s attention was fixed on making cells which contained both Portuguese transliteration and a set of capital and small letters in cursive Cyrillic script. Each cell in her table represented one coherent meaning-making unit, while the whole table constituted a practical guide to decoding cursive Cyrillic characters.

Tania showed her awareness of the literacy genre being produced by writing “Dictation” in Russian underneath her table. Being rather satisfied with her work, she also placed a “Hello Kitty” sticker below, as her teachers used to do in other classrooms. Tania completely reformulated the spatial design anticipated by the teacher, adapting her text to her learning needs. Instead of going along with the format and function of a dictation as a diagnostic tool, she reinvented the genre of dictation text.

6.3 Rosa and Tania: Colluding with and contesting school literacy practices

The two girls’ versions of the dictation differed considerably due to the technological, graphic and linguistic resources they employed and due to their orientation to teacher authority. Rosa mainly followed the teacher’s instructions yet managed the time in a way that suited her. Being used to attributing the use of particular linguistic resources to interactions with particular people about particular topics back at home, as well as being aware of the importance of not standing out, Rosa wanted to make sure of the appropriateness and legitimacy of the choices she was making in the dictation event. She was kept ‘on task’ by
the teacher who defined the available writing space and reminded Rosa of one of the main ideological messages of the dictation exercise – that of keeping the two writing systems separate.

The teacher did not monitor Tania’s production of a dictation text, so Tania was able to do a complete overhaul of the dictation text format and turn it to her purposes. Tania created her own biliteracy table, fashioned along the lines of the charts and tables she had long been familiar with in her home literacy environment. Her agentive resistance to the task defined by the teacher could be interpreted in several ways.

From a New Literacy Studies perspective, it could be argued that, as Tania wrote the Portuguese characters above their Russian counterparts, she revealed one of her meaning-making strategies. Rather than keeping the two semiotic systems apart, Tania drew on all her available semiotic resources in a creative manner. She also extended her linguistic repertoire by transliterating, thus building on her previous lived experiences with writing in Portuguese, instead of ‘switching it off’, as had perhaps been expected by the Russian teacher and as envisaged by traditional views of languages as discrete, bounded objects.

From the point of view of language pedagogy, the implications are clear: Had Tania kept the two writing systems separate, she would not have been able to learn in an active way. Rather than setting aside her knowledge of Portuguese, Tania showed how she could use it in a way that contributed to her learning. Despite the fact that she found herself in a multilingual environment, it was still ‘imagined’ by adults as predominantly Russian. In this environment, Tania asserted her biliterate knowledge, using Portuguese linguistic and orthographic resources alongside Russian ones.

So, to recap, whereas Rosa colluded with the teacher-defined task of ‘doing dictation in Russian’ and sought teacher approval, Tania came across as an independent learner able to make her own decisions and organise her work accordingly. Both girls had access to the same technological resources (writing implements, notebooks) and managed to deploy them in ways that were indexical of their learner identities. Tania’s choices of graphic resources (graphemes, layout/spatial design) and linguistic resources challenged the traditional expectations of correctness and linguistic purism associated with school work. In subtle ways, her practices also challenged the reproduction of the literacy genre of school dictation (e.g. she clearly went beyond matching graphemes to phonemes and adapted the task to her specific needs) while indicating familiarity with other graphic, linguistic and semiotic resources. The choices of both girls regarding engagement with the task revealed their awareness of the range of teacher-student positionings that were possible in a setting such as a
complementary school. They also shed light on the complex ways in which languages and literacies are used and talked about in such multilingual contexts.

7 Final reflections: Multilingual literacy learning in the Russian school

In this paper, I have employed a New Literacy Studies framework and a linguistic ethnographic approach to show how close inspection of the ways in which the technological, graphic, linguistic, social and cultural resources are drawn upon, in situated interactional moves, in classrooms where texts are being produced, can reveal the subtle and multi-faceted ways in which identities are negotiated in multilingual settings such as this Russian complementary school. Through my analysis I have drawn attention to: a) the complex nature of literacy learning in multilingual settings, and the ways in which it is situated in mundane, everyday teacher-student/parent-child interactions and in family histories of language and literacy socialisation, and b) the ways in which teaching and learning practices in complementary schools such as this one can move away from the homogenising language ideologies and practices of mainstream educational settings, whether they be in Portugal, the USSR or the post-Soviet states.

By analysing the two girls’ versions of the dictation task and their interactional moves, I have provided glimpses into their own understanding of what counts as being able to write in Russian in the context of their lives in Portugal. I have also shown that the teacher allowed them to construct their own version of a dictation text, building on their own learning trajectories and on their lived experiences of literacy socialisation in multilingual households. If complementary school teachers such as the one in this study take young people’s literacy learning trajectories and lived experiences of literacy socialisation into account, biliteracy practices and transliteration, combined with familiar semiotic practices, it could provide a key to the opening up of flexible spaces for new learning and for the further development of multilingual repertoires. This kind of pedagogy had in fact been successfully tried out by the Russian teacher in this complementary school classroom to explain palatalisation in Russian through the use of Portuguese language resources.

My analysis has also demonstrated that parents can also provide key spaces for literacy learning and for developing positive dispositions to communication using multiple language and literacy resources. Acting upon her own lived
experiences with language and literacy in different multilingual settings, Tania’s mother fostered Tania’s positive dispositions to communication using multiple language and literacy resources, while Rosa’s family members sought to orient her to developing a compartmentalised language and literacy repertoire. The adults in both families were guided by the common aim of ensuring social mobility, but were deploying different strategies.

Both the teachers and the parents of the children who went to the complementary school had, themselves, been socialised into discourses about language separation in educational settings and about the value of ‘parallel multilingualism’, involving the prestigious official languages of different nations. Having moved to Portugal, the adults and their children encountered familiar traces of these discourses in the PLNM policy guidelines, which were oriented to Portuguese-only educational provision and which represented students who came from homes where other languages were spoken as ‘non-native speakers’, even when they were born in Portugal. The informal nature of the setting in the complementary school and the multiple ties linking the complementary school teachers and their students opened up spaces for alternative discourses, more fluid conceptions of languages and literacies, more flexible pedagogy and the fostering of multilingual literacies. The dictation event analysed in this paper showed how these spaces can be forged, through particular kinds of textual and interactional practices. However, at the heart of the complementary school project, there remained a tension between more fluid conceptions of languages and literacies and more flexible pedagogies, on the one hand, and powerful normative discourses associated with school literacy learning and national origins, on the other hand. Thus, on occasion, teachers insisted on separating the different graphic, linguistic, social and cultural resources that traversed the space of the complementary school. Even within some families, children’s trajectories of literacy learning turned out to be constrained by institutionally shaped regimes of language.

References


