Language Practices and Performances of Identity of Young Adults Within Spaces of a Private University in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores in what ways students from diverse education, demographic, and socio-economic backgrounds interpret spaces and locate themselves within a vertically built hi-tech cosmopolitan private university in Bangladesh. The data are drawn from an ethnographic study on a group of students in a private university in Bangladesh. The analysis of the data shows that the interpretation and realisation of university spaces of these students are relational and relative. These spaces are the site of exhilaration and excitement, on the one hand, and constant struggle, and resistance, on the other. They carry students’ enthusiasm of being part of the newer Western education movement in Bangladesh; they bear with their dreams, desires, and aspirations, not to mention, their conflicts and contradictions and struggles and anguishes; these are also the spaces where they engage in subversive activities and perform alternative identities. These spaces, with students’ individual and collective realisation, transform students while they are transformed too in the process. The paper concludes that the pro-English hi-tech university gives rise to alternative realities for students and these realities need to be understood critically and sympathetically.

Keywords: Space, spatiality, third space, language, identity, private higher education, Bangladesh

Introduction

In this article, I intend to understand how a group of students in Bangladesh engage themselves with the social landscape of a modern high-tech private university. I make connections with the organisational structures of a private university with their experiences within the space, as represented in their
situated language practices. In order to do so, I look at students’ locatedness in space, their language practices and the subject positions that they negotiate for themselves through their language practices. This is a significant endeavour, considering the newer Western education movement in Bangladesh, promoted by the private universities in the name of globalisation and progressivism.

Establishment of private universities is comparatively a new phenomenon in the higher education in Bangladesh. The first university was established in 1992 and in the last 25 years, under the ordinance of the Private University Act 1992, 92 universities have been approved (University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, 2017). This phenomenal growth has been possible because of the educational need of a growing number of students graduating from high school (Alam & Khalifa, 2009), scarcity of places in 40 public universities (Alam, 2009; Alam, Haque, & Siddique, 2006), and the intrinsic and extrinsic values of education, i.e., higher education is the only viable way of being enlightened and appreciated and successful in professional and personal life.

These private universities epitomise the spirit of globalisation. They tend to promote ‘global education’ for the ‘global market’ and they do it in English, the only official language within the university premises (Rahman, 2005; Sultana, 2014b). Most of them are located in different cosmopolitan cities in Bangladesh, mainly in Dhaka with only a few in Chittagong and Sylhet (Alam, 2009). A few of them are exceptionally modern for their contemporary architecture and ambience, high-tech gadgets, and other phenomenal amenities. In fact, these universities baffle the skyline in the urban landscape with vertically built tall buildings, when it is difficult to develop sprawling universities similar to the government ones because of the scarcity of land. While appreciating the role of private universities in higher education and economic growth of the country, I deem it also important to consider their space and spatiality for three specific reasons. First, the physical space of private universities is a stark contrast to the space of the

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1In 2012, a total number of 7,21,979 students passed the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exam (Year 12 final examination) and 61,162 of them got the highest score, GPA (grade point average) 5. However, there are only 31,711 seats for the first year honours students in public universities (Amin, 2012). In other words, even the students with highest score in the HSC exam will not have admission in public universities.
majority schools and colleges from where students graduate and come to study there. It is also glaringly different from its surrounding geo-physicality. The grandiose of the campus somewhat blocks the realities outside the campus. Second, the physical and social construction of space, spatiality and the English-medium education system can be daunting for some students, considering the fact that they come from diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Third, there is a necessity of thinking how students feel when they encounter the ‘global education’ system in English in a vertically grown hi-tech university. Even though there are research studies on the private higher education in Bangladesh which treats knowledge as a business good (Alam et al., 2006; Alam & Khalifa, 2009) and the efficiency of public and private higher education in Bangladesh (Alam, 2009; Wadood, 2006), there is no research on the impact of the space and spatiality of private universities on students’ individual experiences. What meaning does the space signify to them, when it is a plain contrast to their familiar ones? How do they negotiate their positions in such a cosmopoliticised space? What impact does it have on their language practices and identity? Keeping these questions in my mind, my purpose in this article is to understand: 1. how students from varied economic and socio-cultural backgrounds interpret spaces of a private university, and 2. in what ways they relate to the space and locate themselves in the university. In order to do so, first I will discuss the relationship between language and identity and then the significance of space and spatiality as social constructions and in language and identity research.

Language and identity in Applied Linguistics

There is no doubt that language and identity have enough attention in applied linguistics over the years and by gone are the days of the structuralist approach when language and identity was discussed only with a reference to essentialised linguistic features and biological and cultural characteristics (Bucholtz, 2003). By contrast, language is accepted as changeable, going through a constant process of semiotic reconstruction (Pennycook, 2010). Languages do not have fixed or predetermined meaning. They are not unique to any specific social context or individuals. Meaning is realised in social practices.
Several insights about identity have emerged in applied linguistics too over the years. First, language plays a significant role in the construction of individuals’ identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008, p. 98; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995). Nevertheless, linguistic identity falls short in doing justice to “dynamic, dialogic, multiple, and situated nature of identity” and negotiation of identities varies according to social contexts (Faeez, 2011, p. 231). Second, individuals’ identity is more complex than their stereotypical, homogeneous, and unidimensional representation based on their history, personality, learning style, motivation or other unique characteristics. Their affective factors are not always individualistic, but socially determined (Pierce, 1995; Price, 2003). Third, nationality, ethnicity, culture, and locality play a significant role in individuals’ identification despite the fact that global trends impact on their emerging identity (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1988; Hall, 1993; Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2010). Fourth, there are other semiotic resources in addition to language such as dress, body movement, hairstyle, makeup, accessories, separate territories in school and hangouts, and different taste in music to perform specific identity (Ibrahim, 2003). Fifth, individuals may express multiple and multi-layered identities in a specific context (Omoniyi & White, 2006; Suleiman, 2006). In other words, individuals may have ‘identity repertoire’, rather than one ‘identity’ (Suleiman, 2006). Finally, socio-economic and cultural factors, such as gender, age, or socio-cultural and economic positioning of individuals play a significant role in the way they appropriate the language and perform their identity (Block, 2007; Bucholtz & Hall, 2008; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995; Rampton, 2007).

Accepting the fact that multiplicity in language and identity is intricately entwined with the social dynamics makes me wonder whether applied linguistics gets a fuller grasp of the social dynamics with its notion of ‘place’ and ‘context’. I also speculate whether place and context, with their focus on physicality and materiality and relationship between interlocutors in a specific context, adequately capture the inherent fluidity of language and identity. Space is after all, dynamic, open, changeable, and permeable and it is also the ‘geography of linguistic happening’. Therefore, in this paper, I

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2 Researchers in general divide between individual, ethnic, national, migrant, gender, or language identity, i.e., ESL/ EFL or native/non-native identity. However, they are not so simplistic in the sense the multiplicity of identities cannot be compartmentalised into neat categories. They are, in fact, changeable, permeable and mutually interdependent.
attempt to understand the “geography of linguistic happening”, i.e., the “locality (a geography of social space) and language practices (what happens through languages)” (Pennycook, 2010, p. 2) and their impact on performances of identity. In other words, I would like to explore whether space, as a micro-analytic tool, reveals more about language and identity.

In order to do so, in the following section, I will explain how space and spatiality are defined in post-structuralist geography and why I consider it as a significant construct in language and identity research.

Social construction of space and spatiality

From a poststructuralist perspective, space is “social morphology” (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 94 - 95). ‘Social morphology’ refers to the way space gives meaning to individuals’ experiences and also brings structures and functions to life. It is never static, fixed, immobile, “neutral and passive geometry” (Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 24). It is in fact always in the process of giving meaning to individuals’ experiences and being realised with different meanings. The significance of space depends on its spatiality, i.e., how space is socially constructed and consequently, causally influences social life. When ‘spatial’ refers to “a physical or geographical image, something external to the social context and to social action, a part of the ‘environment’, a part of setting for the society”, the term ‘spatiality’ refers to the “formative structure created by society” (Soja, 1989, p. 50). Spatiality identifies the “inherent(ly) social quality of organised space” and specifies the “socially-produced space” (ibid.). Thus, spatiality refers to the social practices, actions, relations, contradictions and struggles that are repeatedly held in space and in the process, both constitute it and are constituted in it. “As a social product, spatiality is simultaneously the medium and outcome, presupposition and embodiment of social action and relationship” (Soja, 1989, p. 129). Space, therefore, requires us to look at not only the contextual or the physical properties of it, but also the social organisation of it, i.e., how it is organised and why; what role it plays in individuals’ language practices; what thoughts and ideologies are brought into it and by whom and with whom; how individuals relate themselves with space and consequently, what contradictions they experience in it. Consequently, space and spatiality seem appropriate to unravel students’ experiences in “high-tech new-capitalist world” (Gee, 2005, p. 223) of the private university in Bangladesh.
The possibilities of space differ from person to person, depending on how it is interpreted, appropriated, recreated (Rechniewski, 2007). The alternative realities that space evokes are best explained in the notion of ‘third space’ propounded by both Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996). Third space transcends first space, i.e., space with its material arrangements and second space, i.e., space with its conceivable meaning to individuals. Here in this paper, for example, first space refers to the modern high-tech infrastructure of the private university that baffles the skyline of Dhaka, Bangladesh. First space also includes the modern amenities and technological gadgets and facilities provided by the university. However, the way first space is perceived, experienced, and lived is complex. On the one hand, the specificities of the private university space not only provide support to education, but also meet expectations of the majority population regarding the image of a private education institution. In other words, the space that UOE has built also represents the collective thoughts of the greater population. Therefore, it is a result of “social superstructures”, i.e., meeting the requirements of the social demand and specific requirements as well as of the institutions (Lefebvre, 1991, p: 85). On the other hand, the interpretation of first space may vary from person to person because of individual perception of the space which is again intricately entwined with geographical, demographical, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds and individual life trajectories. This individual interpretation of first space shows that it is also a ‘conceived space’, varying distinctly in the way it is subjectively experienced. Thus, first space turns into second space or ‘conceived space’, entirely formed mentally and cognitively.

Third space is the outcome of individual practical experiences of day-to-day life and it is ‘lived’, realised and experienced physically and mentally through personal engagement. Consequently, third space is “directional, situational or relational” and “it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 69). In other words, the notion will allow me to understand how students engage with the space and spatiality of the university (third space), which, on the one hand, has been realised in the shape of air-conditioned tall buildings and implemented in the form of the curriculum borrowed from North American universities (first space) and on the other hand, has been subjectively perceived and interpreted (second space) and has been developed in order to match and ensure the conceivable outcome of private education systems (second space), and that is, making dynamic professional graduates prepared for the competitive global job market.
Because of its individual realisation, third space may have varied meanings. It may be full of struggles and contradictions. It may be the space for resistance to the dominant order, created at the margin, periphery, exterior, or border as a protest to the dominant order (hooks, 1992; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). It can also be the context and results of social, political, and economical struggles. People may also find new meanings in third space and engage with it to rediscover unexplored and unaccepted self. Third space may promise newer life, emergent identity, and liberating avenues (Tamboukou, 2004). Rechniewski (2007, p. 98), for example, with reference to city space, states, “Transgressing the limits imposed by gender, class or ethnicity, talented and isolated individuals have very often used the city for their own ends, successfully finding a freedom in the anonymity of city life they would not have enjoyed within the confines of traditional roles”. In summary, space, spatiality, and third space seem to be a fruitful set of constructs to look at the university space critically and understand the possibilities of alternative realities that students experience.

**Research site, participants, and sources of data**

The University of Excellence (UOE)\(^3\) is a private university in Bangladesh. It has marked its place in higher education in Bangladesh along with public universities. The campus itself is an architectural wonder, since it evokes images of space that excels in structure and technological amenities (first space), meeting the expected image of private education institutions perceived by all stakeholders (second space), such as parents, students, university authority, and so on. Many students, specifically from the English-medium education background, prefer to get admission in this university.

I opted for ethnography as a research method. Ethnography consists of a family of methods that ensures direct and sustained contact with participants in the context of their daily lives (O’ Reilly, 2009). Because ethnography firmly establishes that “people are not a cultural or linguistic catalogue” (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, p. 3), it defies context-less extraction and analysis of culture or language. My aim was not to develop an understanding about the participants’ language practice and identification from language alone. My extended time with the research participants on campus, the close observation of students, and my informal discussions with them allowed me

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\(^3\) The name of the university and the participants are pseudonyms.
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to gain a holistic understanding of their language practices and negotiation of identity as embodied activities.

As a critical ethnographer, I observed the participants’ language practices with an expository stance. Only by probing their background and observing them in university spaces, and in communication with their friends could I comprehend the historicity of their language practices. Instead of taking the participants’ utterances at face value, I had to interpret the multiple and layered meaning underlying the utterances.

The ethnographic observation ensured both ‘thick participation’ (Sarangi, 2007) and ‘thick description’ on my part (Geertz, 1973). Thick description required me to observe the participants closely in their interaction, which became significant for building up a detailed picture of the participants’ language practices. The value of thick participation and description was immense. I minimised the ontological gaps between text and context, i.e., how the text and context originated in the language practices, and checked my own emergent interpretations, ‘tuned into’ the participants’ perspective (Maybin, 2006, p. 12), and tried to advance beyond what they said to what they meant or intended to mean by their particular acts of language.

I spent time with them on campus during their recesses. It enabled me to develop ethnographic sensibility (Leung, 2005) and get a ‘feel’ of the relationship among their locatedness in space, language practices and identities. By “getting close” to participants, I developed a “texture, an immediacy, and a depth of understanding” and see their “experiences and involvements, their conflicts and their alliances, their perspectives, and their beliefs” (Grills, 1998, p. 16). Twenty nine participants from a number of different departments volunteered to participate in the research. They kept a digital recorder provided to them and recorded their own conversations in their own terms, whenever they spent time with their friends in different spaces of the university during their class breaks.

To be accepted within the private space of the participants, I approximated their style by wearing salwar kamij, which young adult women wear, instead of the saree, a traditional dress which, as a university teacher, I usually wear at the University of Dhaka. At the initial stage of the data collection, I sat in the cafeteria, allowing the research participants and other students to become accustomed to my presence there. My identity as a researcher was appropriated and recontextualised by the research participants
in the form of address they used to refer to me – none of which was selected by me – solely dependent on the comfort and desire of the participants. Interestingly, many of them preferred the relationship at the personal level rather than the professional one. They called me either *apu* (elder sister) or *aunt* (sister of the mother), rather than ‘madam’ or ‘ma’am’, which made it easier for them to ‘hang out’ with me. Hamid (2010, p. 263), in a research study conducted in his native village in Bangladesh, observed the research participants’ preference for his professional identity, “muting his local identity”, even though he went back to the schools in his home town, where he had grown up. I assumed the nature of the research somewhat determined the identity the participants negotiated for the researcher. As Hamid mentioned, it is more important to accept whatever identity the research participants prefer for the researcher to ensure the smooth progress of the research, which I also did.

Immense importance was placed on ethical considerations in the research design. The process of recording casual conversations was, therefore, clearly stated, explained, and repeatedly discussed at every step of the research. In order to record the casual conversations in day-to-day life, the participants had to be briefed properly about the process of observation and the purpose of the recordings, even though it was clearly stated in the flyer, information for students, information sheet, and consent form. Within a few days, I realised that it was difficult to record the conversations without including the research participants’ friends, with whom they spent their time during class-breaks. Hence, I asked the research participants to encourage their friends with whom they spent their leisure time on campus to participate in the research; as a result, 29 participants constituted several groups of friends. In this way, I was able to minimise the participation of non-research participants in casual conversations. In some cases, research participants obtained their friends’ signatures on consent forms provided by me. In some instances, research participants voiced the purpose of the research and asked their interlocutors’ permission to record, especially when they were on their own, or when there was no opportunity to obtain signed consent forms, or when their friends participated in conversation randomly or sporadically. These verbal consents were recorded on the digital recorder. It was also clearly explained to them that the names of these participants would be anonymised if any part of their interaction was used in the research. However, over all, to avoid any threat of ethical haziness or conflict, the conversations of non-research participants included for analysis in the study were kept to a minimum.
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The selection of the space for this paper was done based on the observable linguistic and lexical features of language practices held in those spaces. For example, during the fieldwork, I found that participants’ language practices are distinctly different in linguistic and lexical features from each other in a specific space in the university: the courtyard, an open space in the centre of the second floor of the main academic buildings of the university. The courtyard seems to be frequented by participants who are quintessentially different in terms of their language practices and educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. It seems that, as if two different worlds accidentally collide and coexist within the central space of the university. I also became more intrigued when I had been constantly insisted to avoid the courtyard by the teachers of the university and the participants of the research. Some of the participants told me on my face that they would not allow me to accompany them to the courtyard. Some of them were polite and said to me that I would not feel comfortable there. The courtyard, hence, has been selected as the space for the collection of data.

I engaged with the data drawn from the courtyard from a critical point of view and explored who said what in what ways. I wanted to unravel what subject positions they negotiated for themselves in the specific space of the university. Participants were also continually asked questions about what they meant or intended to mean with their particular acts of language. Consequently, the emergent interpretations through the analysis were ‘tuned into’ participants’ perspectives and voices (Maybin, 2006, p. 12). Therefore, the research itself was polyphonic, i.e., containing multiple independent voices working together in a text (Bakhtin, 1981). Given below are the number of key themes that emerged when the space of the courtyard was considered in terms of participants’ locatedness, language practices and identity.

The construction of other

Nayeem, Ashiq, and Shamim were from similar kind of educational, demographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, they studied in Bangla-medium schools and colleges. They did not have elitist education in English medium schools or colleges. They spent their childhood and major part of their life in rural environment, except for Shamim. He was born and brought up in Chittagong, which is the second capital city in Bangladesh. Abeer’s life trajectory was different from others and somewhat unusual for the elitist English medium university. His father was a rickshaw puller and
his mother was a housemaid. His study at UOE was supported by the university financial support unit, costs of books by donations from a mosque in his locality and other expenses by two philanthropists. All of these participants had one single goal – be financially solvent in future.

UOE seemed to signify different meanings and instigate intense feeling in these participants. For example, the university itself with the modern architectural structure was unfamiliar to Abeer and he was intimidated when he first came to the university. He mentioned in one of the interviews⁴, “I asked myself, ‘where have I come?’ … First day, I didn’t even dare to enter the university. I was so afraid. I asked myself, ‘should I get inside the university?’ In fact, I stood at the entrance for more than 10 minutes…in the earlier days, I was always afraid”. When Abeer commented on how the physical space intimidated him, Nayeem shared how he felt when he first encountered the English-medium education system, “To be honest, I don’t feel good about the university. I am forced to be in this English-medium university. I am not here at my own will. … I was so anxious and troubled in the first semester. I was upset. I couldn’t tell to my parents what I was experiencing. I was under a lot of mental pressure. I couldn’t give up UOE. I couldn’t tell my parents. I kept on wondering how I would spend 4 years of my life here … how I would continue the study for 12 semesters”.

Not only the space and spatiality of the university that intimidated them; ‘other’ students as well made them conscious about their socioeconomic backgrounds. Abeer stated, “Many of them (students) come from good families, I mean, from high class family. … my financial condition is also not good. It is difficult to adjust with them. They speak in standard language, in proper ways. It is tough to get along with them. I cannot go up and talk to them easily. I somewhat feel strange. They are different. Separate”. In other words, he could not relate himself with the powerful social group or network of the campus. This feeling of being different was so ingrained that it was difficult for him to ignore it. His repeated use of ‘they’/ ‘them’ showed that they made Abeer feel strange, different, and ‘separate’ in terms of his own educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

⁴The data from the interviews are given in simplified translation in order to ensure readability and comprehensibility.
These participants experienced other conflicted feelings because the university space promised refuge from the stern realities of life and an escape from the space at home. Abeer mentioned that he found the space of UOE a site of joy and delight. He felt exhilarated because of his experiences of freedom on campus. He could dissociate himself from his own space at home, class, socioeconomic background. He stated, “When I come here, I find a kind of happiness … the environment at home, I mean, is not that much nice. A bit dirty. Here everything is clean. Then, the campus is also very beautiful. In every respect, I mean, I feel good (about it\(^5\))”. Abeer also mentioned in one of the later interviews that he liked being on campus because he felt he was like everyone else. The campus liberated him from the bonds and shackles of realities that enveloped him when he was at home. He meshed into the crowd. Thus, he conformed what Rechniewski (2007) identified about the privilege of being in an unfamiliar space (cf. Section 2).

The university also promised a future that enabled Abeer to ignore the constant feeling of alienation and disaffiliation. When I asked him if the space and spatiality of the university made him feel sad, he quickly responded, “Why will I be sad? My main target is to finish the study and graduate from the university. I don’t need to consider who is doing what”. Nayeem also bore with the mental pressure and stated, “In the job market, I will have upper hand over any student from any other college, for example, Titumir College (a Bangla medium college under National University). I will be better in coping with the colleagues from English-medium education background in the professional life. If I may continue my study here by the grace of Allah, I believe I will do well in life. If I am prepared for my future because of the university, I will be more than satisfied”. Thus, the space and spatiality of UOE promised a new life and new space. For them, the university itself was “a location of radical openness and possibility” (hooks, 1990, p. 153).

The space and spatiality of UOE worked in two different ways for students like Abeer or Nayeem: it marginalised them and at the same time, it gave them tool to resist their sense of alienation with a promise of a better

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\(^5\)The university is centrally air-conditioned. When the entire country suffers from frequent power failure every day, commonly known as load-shedding, the university provides electricity supply by generators.
life. Space gave them possibilities of pluralities in terms of future and identity. Their plight, pangs, and pleasure were similar to the ones of female students in the first university-associated colleges in the UK for women in the 19th century. These female students experienced “the unbearable heaviness and lightness of being”... women in colleges, on the one hand, lived within a ‘constraining reality’, the social boundaries of accepted womanhood; on the other hand, they were dreaming of a ‘limitless freedom’, the kind of freedom, education, economic independence and ‘a room of their own’ ...could offer them” (Tamboukou, 2004, p. 410). They refashioned “new forms of subjectivity, always oscillating between the ‘unbearable lightness and heaviness of being; by adopting unstable positions between them” (Tamboukou, 2004, p. 399).

The courtyard: Space of transgression

The courtyard is located very much at the centre of the campus: it is an open area in the middle of the second floor, extending from both the main academic buildings. It resembles an amphitheatre or a football/basketball stadium/ court with raked seats. Because of its location at the centre of the two buildings, teachers and students walk pass the courtyard all the time. Abeer, Nayeem, Ashiq, and Shamim spent their time there regularly. At different times during the ethnographic study, they were found sharing stories about how they flouted the rules, regulations, and administrative system of the university to their benefit. This is the space where they swapped ideas on how to select subjects based on the teacher, how to investigate previous teaching history of the teacher, how to find out which teacher used more Bangla in class compared to others, how to identify the teacher who was lenient in markings, or how to pretend sickness, and manipulate the teacher if they felt they were not ready for the exams, and so on. They also shared how they took help of other students who had better competence in English and relationship with teachers and the administration, for writing letters for extension or manipulating the relationship to their own advantage. They also mentioned how tactfully they avoided presentations in English, leading the other students from English medium school to present their group work in front of the class. In one of the interviews, Nayeem, for example, shared with me that they usually went to course advising, doing an

6The metaphor is originally used by Simons (1995 in Tamboukou, 2004, p. 410) to show the contrast “between constraining limitations and the limitless freedom” individuals may experience in a space.
extensive homework on the faculty and chose the courses based entirely on the factors such as “which faculty was not serious in his work, which faculty was easy to understand in class, which faculty was good as a person, which faculty was strict or bad or did not make students retake an exam, and set easy questions for the exam?”. Thus, the space in the courtyard promised a certain kind of freedom to them that allowed them to openly share their frustration. The space also allowed them the distance from the central space, that is, the space which were used for academic and administrative works. Consequently, they could come up with effective strategies on how to get along in the space and with the spatiality of the university.

The longer piece of conversation given below was held in the courtyard and it was divided into several sections according to the main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

**Space, language practices, and linguistic competence in English**

In the first section (lines 1 – 10), the participants talked about a prerequisite and compulsory English course, Eng 103. Eng 103 and Eng 105 were the most difficult prerequisite courses that students who were weaker in English dreaded and tended to avoid taking until the later semesters. KK did not do well in one of the mid-term exams in this course and he was worried. Ashiq attended the classes, but at the last moment, decided to bunk the mid-term exam, since he was not ready for the exam. He was worried that he would not come up with an acceptable excuse to convince the teacher to retake his exam.

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7The university followed American education system and hence, the teachers were called faculty and students had the freedom of choosing courses during the advising at the beginning of the semester. The literal translation of the word fakibaj is ‘deceitful’. However, here Nayeem meant someone who was not serious towards his commitments as a teacher. If the teacher was fakibaj, he would be flexible in running the course, making it for students to survive in the course. If the teacher failed them or gave poor grade, they had to retake the course and pay the course fees per credit.
Extract 1

Language guide: Roman= Bangla; **bold** = English; *underlined* = Hindi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Casual Conversation</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ashiq ((KK walks to them.)) kire chutia!</td>
<td>((KK walks to them.) Hey, fucker!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nayeem</td>
<td>ki khobor?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ashiq</td>
<td>asoni bhala bai?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>KK</strong></td>
<td>mon bala nai. sharir bala nai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ashiq</td>
<td>achha, <em>103r</em> ki oboshtha?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Shamim <strong>He got</strong> bash. <strong>You got</strong> bash ((‘bash’ means bamboo)).</td>
<td>He shoved it (Eng 103) up his ass. You shoved it (Eng 103) up your ass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Ashiq</td>
<td>amito porikkha dei nai.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Shamim ((looking at Ashiq)) tumi porikkha na diya bash khaiso. o parikkha diye bash khaise. kamon?</td>
<td>You got it shoved up your ass by not taking the exam. He got it shoved up his ass by taking the exam. Understood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Abeer (singing a Hindi movie song)aaaaaaaaaa … haley dil, mousam ata hai agar …mehboob</td>
<td>(singing a Hindi movie song) aaaaaaaa … If this heart falls in love … lover</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this extract, the use of English was minimal. These participants spoke predominantly either in colloquial Bangla or in regional varieties of Bangla. The slangs spoken in Bangla (line 1 and 8) and in English and Bangla (line 6) were strong and provocative. Their choice of songs, i.e., the sources of

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8KK and PP in Extract 1 were not research participants. However, they agreed that their conversations would be used for the research purposes.
Language Practices and Performances

entertainment, also seemed distinctly different. Nayeem and Abeer always sang songs from Bangla and Indian movies (line 9). The constellation of linguistic and lexical features in their language practices and engagement with the Indian and Bangladeshi popular culture indicated their social histories (Sultana, 2015a,b, 2014a; Sultana & Dovchin, 2015). Heller (2007), for example, indicated how the use of African American English syntax of Dominican American high school students revealed longer term contact with the specific experiences the language and identification incurred. Ashiq was also in trouble for Eng 103, so was KK. Abeer and Nayeem (discussed earlier) lamented that they were always in trouble because of their inadequacy in English, the only medium of education at UOE. Thus, their linguistic competence in English differentiated them from other students.

Social production of the courtyard: Third space

This section of the conversation reveals the nature of activities that went on in the courtyard. It started from goggling at female students to smoking cigarette to maintaining a liaison with the security guards, and so on.

Extract 2

(A security guard walks into the courtyard.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Casual Conversation</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Abeer</td>
<td>mamare dhor!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Abeer</td>
<td>((putting the digital recorder in front of him)) kotha bolen mama.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Mama</td>
<td>ki bolbo, mama?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^9\) The office-support staff and students usually called each other by endearing addresses, such as *mamal mamu* (maternal uncle) or *khala* (maternal auntie).


Do you want to say anything to your wife and kids? … Uncle is leading such a comfortable life. He walks around the campus and sees beautiful chicks ((laughing out loud)). Hey, they are supposed to be looked at ((admired)), Uncle. “Humans worship beauty. Allah has given ((you)) eyes to watch. Appreciate the beautiful things ((around you)). They are the creation of Allah”.

((They continue with their conversations.))

16. Ashiq  ehane ami akdin boya roisilam. mama tinchar jone aise. aiya amare agei koya gese, >“aitese, aitese”<. mamarato shobai bhalo. angore chine jane. amnego amago loge akta bhalo khatil. apnarato thaken mat porjaye. amago loge jodi kharap hoi,

I was sitting here one day. Three or four of the uncles came. They told me earlier, “They are coming. They are coming” ((the Proctor and other administrative officers)). Uncles are all good. You know us well. We have good relations with you all.
The language of interaction between Ashiq, his friends and the security guard was mainly a mixture of regional varieties of Bangla and Colloquial Bangla (CB), instead of Standard Colloquial Bangla (SCB). Ashiq, his friends and the security guard seemed to have similar linguistic trajectories and they linguistically made and sustain their relationships. Hence, it was builte (a word from Chapai Nawabgonj or the greater Rajshahi division in the north Bangladesh) instead of bolte (line 15), dahe instead of dake (line 15), and ase instead of ache (line 15); boyarosilam instead of boshechhilam, amgore instead of amader, and amnego instead of apnader (line 16), and so on. In line 15, claiming that the security guard on duty ogled female students, Ashiq developed a sense of fraternity with him. Their choice of lexis (mal) indicated informality, familiarity, and friendliness, and their previous linguistic history in interaction. The meaning of the space thus seemed to be constructed and sustained collectively in the language practices of students as well as the activities that occurred in the space.

Ashiq used mal, a derogatory term for ‘women’. He also justified the ogling of female students, bringing the ‘voice’ of the religious preacher (line 15). He shifted to SCB from colloquial Bangla in his style of speaking and selection of specific words, such as Allah choke dise dekhar jonne, shundar jinish dakho, Allahr srishti. He put stress on the importance of ogling women with an emphasis on the active verbs dekha and dakho. Here, his utterance was ‘double-voiced’ (Bakhtin, 1981) because he used the dialogue of religious preachers usually said by them to inspire individuals to appreciate the natural creation of Allah and be more appreciative of Him. Ashiq used these same phrases for a purpose which was strictly prohibited in Islam, i.e., staring at women. With the voice of the Islamic preacher and the use of SCB, he elevated the official status of the activity.

Ashiq, his friends, and the security guard discursively constructed the meaning of the courtyard. Ashiq deliberately stressed the mutual dependency of the security guard and himself by locating themselves both at the
grassroots level (*matporjaye*) in line 16 compared to the administrative officers, who were higher in status in the administrative building. Ashiq’s language was not stylised with slang and swear words, indicating that Ashiq did not intend to exert power or displayed his masculinity to the security guard. Instead, he intended to maintain a friendly relationship with him. Thus, the space of the courtyard and their locatedness allowed these students to bond with a network of people within the socioeconomic dynamics of the space and engaged in language practices. They reached for others with whom they could construct that legitimate space on campus. In addition, with language practices and subversive activities they fulfilled the requirement of a macho culture, i.e. bonding, collaboration, cooperation, and negotiation, in order to sustain the group dynamics. They reached for and aligned themselves with those with whom they could construct a meaningful relationship. They opted for “a collective engagement of mutually implicated identities” (Smith & Katz, 1993, p. 69).

The university authorities created the courtyard for students, so that they could spend time with their friends (second space). However, as these students were “situated in space” (Lefebvre, 1991, p: 35), they modified its meanings through their practices (third space). Every now and then, the security guards were found to have chatty conversations with the participants, receive cigarettes, ask for Taka 20/30 from them, and swap stories about other subversive activities that they observed in the courtyard and on campus (these stories cannot be mentioned for ethical reasons). The silence of the security guards about the students’ misconduct (i.e., students smoking) in the courtyard and their attempts to protect them from the higher authority, at least in these interactions, showed their allegiances with the students. Consequently, they produced a new sense and new dimension of the courtyard: a haven for subversive activities. Thus, the courtyard was continually re-invented with new meanings in these participants’ language practices and activities, displaying a duality of space. It existed and was produced in repeated activities (Löw, 2008) and rediscovered and reinvented with various meanings.

The courtyard was not a mere container of their language practices, but a “spatial realisation of place” (Pennycook, 2010, p. 63). With their ‘spatial realisation of space’, the social meaning of the courtyard was reproduced. It became the third space for these students, realised and negotiated and appropriated in their own terms. In addition, the realisation of a third space was not individualistic. For example, Ashiq was informed by the security
guards prior to the invigilation of the Proctor that he should stop smoking (line 15). Thus, the third space was co-constructed by Ashiq, Abeer, Nayeem, the security guards, and so on. They all developed a sense of collective feeling toward each other and they together sustained the meaning of the third space.

The locatedness of the space was very much in contrast with the activities that took place in the courtyard. The courtyard was physically located at the centre of the campus, even though metaphorically speaking, we may consider it to be marginal. It was not hidden from the eyes of the teachers or the administrators. This showed that subversive activities do not always happen in this liminal space. Students like Ashiq or Abeer felt marginalised on campus, but they came to terms with their feelings of marginality, displacement, dislocation, inadequacy, or alienation when they were sitting at the centre of the campus. Thus, the spatiality of the courtyard revealed the participants’ collective ways of synthesising those feelings inside.

**Space and ‘yearning from the margin’**

In the section given below (line 17-28), Ashiq mentioned that he developed close friendship with Shiraj bhai, a confidante of a disputed student on campus, Firoze. Firoze was known on campus for his notorious activities: carrying knives and daggers in his bag and creating brawl inside and outside the campus, and attacking students with knives and daggers.

Extract 3

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10 Here *bhai* means mate or friend older in age.
17. Abeer: Shiraj bhaiyer shathey ki koros? what do you do with Shiraj bhai?

18. Ashiq: Shiraj bhaiyer loge? ((kotha)) koi, eije, amni ... with Shiraj bhai? I just talk to him, in fact, for no reason at all.

19. Abeer: oi shala bhuwa ... you are a bogus brother-in-law ((swearing words)).

20. Ashiq: ami phone tone dei. Heo amare phone tone dei. niche kono akta room loitese. Club korbo. I call him every now and then. He also calls me. They are taking a room on the ground floor of the University for a club. They intend to form a club.

21. PP: ki club? What club?

22. Ashiq: hera loibo. Ar amitho asi. They will take the room. And I am there with them.

((In between the conversation, Abeer and Nayeem keep on singing songs from Bangladeshi and Indian movies on the background.))

23. Shamim Assalamalaikum ((Arabic greeting)). Ki obostha? Peace be upon you. What’s up?

24. Shiraj: Firoze bhaiera aise? Have Firoze bhai and others come?
Ashiq mentioned that he had friendship with Shiraj bhai and his friends. They were working towards forming a club, taking a room in the space on the ground floor where all the clubs were situated. He wanted to affiliate himself with the club set up by Firoz, Shiraj, and their group, even though he did not know what the club would be about (lines 20 & 21). It did not matter to him what the club was about, as long as he could be a part of it. The club promised newer space and newer identity for him. The club promised a sense of belonging, specifically when he did not have access to any other clubs in the university. His frustration was obvious that everyone had a club to spend time in, but they did not have one.

Ashiq located himself in the courtyard and looked for a space which could be officially claimed as his. He saw other students occupying clubs where he could not find his niche. Hence, sitting in the courtyard, he dreamt of having his own club and he knew he needed to affiliate with a stronger group on campus. hooks (1990, p. 15), with reference to her own experience as an African America woman, stated that people who were oppressed and marginalised yearned not to replace the oppressed or take over their positions. Neither did they only fight for an alternative identity to fight
against the oppression and dehumanisation. Instead, they yearned and thrived for “creative, expansive self-actualisation”. Ashiq seemed to do so and he saw the club as a way to relocate himself at the centre and he reached for ‘others’ with whom he could construct that legitimate space on campus.

The other identity in other space

Ashiq, Abeer, and Nayeem seemed to perform ‘a kind of laddish masculinity’ when they were in the courtyard, like the undergraduate academic writing students in a university in London (Preece, 2006). There was a certain kind of raw energy in their use of regional variety of Bangla. The swear words in Bangla, combination of Bangla and English in swear words, provocative songs from South Asian films, wry humour in terms of their own competence in English, their attitude towards women, and their liaison with the security guards, Shiraj bhai and Firoze bhai made their presence in the courtyard undeniably strong and resilient. The space and the spatiality of the English-medium university might put them in a compromising condition; they might be less competent in English; they might need help in writing were confident, witty, vibrant, and strategic when they were in the courtyard and they negotiated this shift in their identification by inventing and reinventing the courtyard as their third space.

Ashiq yearned for the companion and camaraderie of Shiraj and this indicated his desire for group affiliation and recognition. Participants like Ashiq tended to reach for and align themselves with those with whom they could construct meaningful relationships. They turned for “a collective engagement of mutually implicated identities” (Smith & Katz, 1993, p. 69). As the courtyard was the arena where they could engage in this process, it became the site of multi-dimensional experiences. This deliberate choice of space was the “political and geographical act of choosing marginality”, as it was identified by Soja (1996, p. 97). The subjectivity that they negotiated in that specific space of the courtyard allowed them to discuss and come to term with the limitations that they encountered on campus. This choice was the “construction of other forms of counter-hegemonic or subaltern identity and more embracing communities of resistance” (Soja, 1996, p: 97). When they would relocate themselves in their much-desired club in future, their engagement with the space would presumably change, and so would be their language practices and identity. That is why there was no finality in the pattern of their language practices and their sense of self. Their practices in the courtyard gave us the essence of their identity. However, their
identification was evolving and emerging anew from the past, to present, and
to the future, as well as the meanings of the spaces were constantly changing
as first, second, and third space.

Conclusion

The paper explored the language practices and performances of identity of
students in the cosmopolitan space of a private university (first space). The
space and spatiality developed in the form of the western education system
rendered different meanings to students (second space) and its realisation
was complex. It was not one central space with quintessentially one single
meaning, taken and accepted as given by the university authority. It was
fragmented into smaller spaces, such as the courtyard or the club, and
appropriated by the students. The smaller spaces were the third spaces,
heterogeneous in terms of how they were interpreted, invented, and
reinvented by students in their practices and identification and the invented
third space and spatiality did not conform to the central one. Hence, the
space in the university was “ideological, lived, and subjective one” and
“intimately tied to lived experiences” (Warf & Arias, 2009, p. 4).

These smaller spaces, integrated within the bigger space of the
university, apparently were the "sphere of juxtaposition and coexistence"
(Low, 2008, p. 25), as if different worlds had collided under the same
troposphere. The stark differences between the courtyard and the University
indicated that the private universities were the replicas of post-modern
societies—“complex, fragmented, jumbled” (Warf & Arias, 2009). The
University carried the excitement of the newer Western education movement
in Bangladesh; it reflected the conflicts and contradictions that arose from the
fixity and fluidity of a global space; it bore with students’ struggle and
anguish; it also embraced their subversive activities and alternative identities;
it also contained their dreams, desires, and aspirations. Their performances of
identities were also always “open to constant dialogical transformation”
(Pujolar, 2001, p. 32). Nevertheless, there was a sense of vulnerability in the
way some students try to connect with the central space and spatiality. Their
yearning for being accepted at present and being successful in future makes
me wonder, as an educator - should we leave them on their own and let them
grapple and find their ways in the space of the university and later on, to their
future or should we critically question the justifiability of the kind of
alternative realities the cosmopolitan private university offer to these
students?
Transcription Guide
“…” reporting statements of others
((…)) non-linguistic features and
non-
explanation of utterances or

situation explainers for readers’
comprehensibility
slower pace than the surrounding

talk
quicker pace than the surrounding talk

CAP loud utterances

: /::/ ::: sustained elongation of a syllable.

Language Guide
Regular New Roman Bangla
Bold New Roman English
Italics Hindi

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