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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Series Editor: Viv Edwards

Heavenly Readings

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Andrey Rosowsky

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wa min allahi at-tawfiq ['ultimately, success is from Allah']

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Foreword

I am indeed honoured to be invited to write this foreword having had the prior privilege of working with Andrey Rosowsky in my capacity as co-editor of the volume *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion* (John Benjamins, 2006) to which he contributed the chapter titled 'The role of liturgical literacy in UK Muslim communities'. I am pleased to observe that the promise of that chapter is now fleshed out as a full length monograph. It is not only confirmation that minority ethnoreligious communities present us with a rich context for sociolinguistic scholarship, but also that they represent legitimate sites for exploring the interface between religion and the sociology of language.

Rosowsky's research population both constitutes a significant demography culturally and politically in the United Kingdom, as well as one within which language (in) education issues had until recently received rather scant if not superficial treatment. In this regard, the research reported in this book is evidently cutting-edge and will no doubt serve as a trail blazer for further research. It contributes in large measure to extending the frontier of the emerging discipline of the Sociology of Language and Religion as well as to establishing and fine-tuning its methodologies.

Designing the study on which the book is based as an ethnographic investigation has enabled Rosowsky to write deftly about his subject community from the perspective of a co-opted outsider, a position from which he has obviously garnered unique, incisive and well-informed insider perspectives. As a white middle-class intellectual and a practising Muslim living in the community about which he writes, he skilfully avoids the pitfalls we very often expect of those who research the Other. The critical mind with which he attends the issues he covers, together with the benefit of his perspectives, ensures that the arguments he advances are flawless and certainly not those of an apologist.

The richness of this work is evident in the smooth mind journeys Rosowsky undertakes as he criss-crosses communities in the UK and several locations in Western and Eastern Punjab, which constitute his frames of reference for engaging with language and literacy issues. These translocal and transnational connections are interlaced with movement through historical periods as he attempts vigorously to trace the trajectories

responsible for the contemporary literacy practices of his research population. His claims, intricate as these are, are lucidly argued and with seeming ease but without necessarily compromising the rigour one expects from work of first grade scholarship such as this.

Rosowsky employs a number of strategies, the consequence of which is the potentially broad appeal of the monograph. The discussion chapters 3–7 open with a vignette which set the tone as well as serve as a backdrop for the arguments they advance. These are complemented by pictorial data which complexify but nevertheless authenticate the analysis by triangulation. Through all these we enter the community whose ethnography the monograph presents. Our entry is further facilitated by the construction of a unique materiality through the close attention to detail that we find in accounts such as:

Tenter Street, close to the railway, in 1950, could boast of two Italian residents, Antonio Maccio, at number 65, and Franco Annibaldi, at number 69, but its other residents all had local names. By 1970, Mohammad Azam was at number 39, Ali Sher at 43 and Arif Mohammad at 45. We also notice here the custom of buying houses adjacent to one another which characterised the early purchase of houses by the Mirpuri community in the 1960s.

The manner in which Rosowsky successfully links the skills acquired from ordinary everyday social and religious practices of community life to the acquisition of skills necessary for school literacy practice via an adaptive process is ingenious. There is an obvious departure from the normative centre-staging of English in works of this kind which presents a different but creatively fresh focus and aesthetics. By the time we come to Chapter 12, which is dedicated to English, the minority and community languages and culture have received sufficient attention and treatment of detail to the extent that they can hold their own as reference points for a discussion of mainstream school literacy activities in English.

The consequence of Rosowsky's sophisticated discussion, I shall conclude, is a book that is at once entertaining, informative and highly educative. I say this without an iota of doubt and I am convinced you will find this to be self-evident truth.

Tope Omoniyi
Roehampton, April 2008

Part 1

The Study of Liturgical Literacy