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# Gegenwärtige Sprachkontakte im Kontext der Migration

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## Assessment in Schools from a Translanguaging Angle

### 1 Introduction

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century many societies have taken up assessment as a way to evaluate the performance of their citizens, as well as their own. But these assessments most often rely on language as defined by nation-states. That is, assessments are constructed in, and expect answers in, what is socioculturally constructed as the language of the state. What we know as English, Spanish, French, Chinese, etc. has little to do with the language of people. This is especially so in the case of bi/multilingual people whose language repertoire consists of practices that often fall outside of what is considered the conventions of the “standard language” of the nation-state. For this reason, there is a mismatch between what we commonly refer to as language within what is constructed as a nation-state and the actual language practices of people.

This paper attempts to shed light on what adopting a translanguaging framework would mean for assessment. It starts by differentiating the notion of *A language* that is the basis for most assessment, from the theory of language that we present here. Taking up the case of bilingual/multilingual test-takers, specifically in schools, the paper shows how our present conception of language in assessment results in unfair evaluation of what bilingual students know and are able to do, thus impacting how educators are positioned to instruct these students. We base our analysis on the theoretical concept of translanguaging (García 2009; García / Li Wei 2014), which we review next. We end by reviewing some alternative frameworks for assessment that take up translanguaging in ways that give bilingual students a better opportunity to demonstrate what they know and are able to do, both linguistically and content-wise.

### 2 Translanguaging

One of the most common misconceptions about language is that English, Spanish, French, etc. are linguistic objects. Discrete national “languages” are sociopolitical constructs (Heller 2007; Makoni / Pennycook 2007). What people have is language, not *A language* (Jørgensen et al. 2011; Møller / Jørgensen 2009). That is, speakers have a repertoire (Blommaert 2010) of linguistic features that are part of their idiolects. Some of those features fall within the conventions of the societal construction of “the national language”, and some do not. People use the different features in their repertoire in diverse circumstances. That is, all speakers *have* language, although they *do* language differently.

Sometimes they “language”<sup>1</sup> according to societal rules imposed by powerful institutions, such as school or government. Other times they language according to family conventions or neighborhood/community customs. This is precisely one of the most important characteristics of language – its immense variability and flexibility to be able to adapt to different communicative contexts. And although this is so for all speakers, the language repertoire of bilingual/multilingual speakers is even more sociolinguistically complex.

In addition to the variability of language features that all speakers have, the language repertoire of bilinguals contains features that have been marked as belonging to one discrete national language or another. The variability of their language repertoire is now marked not only socially, but also politically. In some cases, these marked linguistic features are exaggerated precisely to differentiate one discrete national language from what is constructed as another in what Kloss (1978) has called a process of *Ausbau*. This has been the case, for example, of many of the national languages of the former Yugoslavia.

The many children growing up today as simultaneous bilinguals have to very early differentiate which language features in their language repertoire can be used to communicate in different contexts. From an external societal perspective, the child may be speaking X or Y, but from the child’s perspective what he or she has is one language repertoire.

This perspective, that what bilingual speakers have is one language repertoire with features that are socio-politically marked as belonging to one national language or another, is what defines a theory of translanguaging. Bilingual speakers have to actively select some features or others in order to communicate in monolingual contexts, but what they have is one language repertoire, which they often use among themselves in more fluid ways. The more fluid language use among bilinguals is the result of not having to actively select some features in order to make themselves understood by other bilinguals. Translanguaging then refers to *what bilinguals do with their language*, sometimes using features fluidly among themselves, other times selecting features from their complex language repertoire according to national social norms. Translanguaging points to the complexity and richness of language use by bilinguals.

A theory of translanguaging poses that bilinguals have a language repertoire of features that they learn to use according to societal norms. In bilingual contexts, they often use these features fluidly because the others in the communicative exchange also have similar features in their repertoire. Bilinguals also learn to suppress features that are not at all present in the repertoire of others when this impedes communication. What is important then is to realize that a theory of translanguaging trumps what has been called code-switching (for code-switching see, for example, Auer 1999). It is not that bilingual speakers switch languages, for there are no “languages” to be able to switch. Bilinguals use their language repertoire, as all speakers do, sometimes using all their language features, other times selecting different features to communicate appropriately with various speakers in different situations.

### 3 Language and assessments in schools

Most nation-states have used educational systems as a way of imposing the use of certain language features, and not others. The features of the language used in school often resemble the ways of languaging of the elite of that society, or, said another way: the language repertoire of the elite contains the features that are most accepted in schools. Those are precisely the language features that are used in the construction of assessments and that are expected as answers. This means that the children of the monolingual elite will always have somewhat of an advantage in dealing with the language of assessment, since their language repertoire contains more exclusively the language features that the school system requires.

In the case of bilingual students, the features of their language repertoire exceed the limited ones used in monolingual assessments. This means that bilingual students are penalized for having more features – a richer repertoire than that of monolingual elite students. Students who belong to racial or ethnic groups which have been minoritized are penalized even more. Often these minoritized bilingual students have not had the opportunity to attend good schools and have not had the opportunity to attend bilingual schools (Menken / Kleyn / Chae 2012). Thus, they most likely have not appropriately learned how to overtly monitor the features of their repertoire; therefore, their language use is more fluid. Assessment that is limited to certain national language conventions then works against the richness of the bilingual students’ complex repertoire. The lack of flexibility woven into assessment to take into account bilinguals’ fluid language practices has enormous repercussions for education. If assessment is being used to evaluate what students know and are able to do, and thus to exclude students or provide opportunities, then it behooves us to think carefully about the role of language in assessment. If every assessment is an assessment of language as has been said (American Educational Research Association et al. 2014), then the ways in which we conceive of language is extremely important. Specifically, understanding the powerful, yet unrecognized, role language plays in all assessments is critical in forging ways to appropriately use assessments with bilinguals.

Bilingual students pose a challenge to national education systems and their assessment apparatus, for as we have considered above, their language repertoire differs substantially from what has been constructed as the “national standard language” used in most assessments. Emergent bilingual students who are acquiring new features associated with the language of another state pose a particular challenge to assessment. Because the nation-state is especially interested in knowing whether these students are making progress in acquiring what is considered a discrete “new language”, they are continuously assessed in the “new language” itself. Language has most often been understood as a series of stable rules and a set of skills (lexical, phonological, syntactical and morphological ones) that can be acquired linearly, taught explicitly, and then can be assessed. The problem with *assessment in a “new language”* is that the language repertoire of emergent bilingual students is expanding and growing exponentially, whereas the constructed national language used in assessment is static. More importantly, the conceptualization of “new language” does not take into account the dynamic and fluid nature of the use of language by bilinguals, their translanguaging.

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter we sometimes use the word “language” as a verb to highlight what people “do”.

At the same time, *content assessments* are supposed to capture whether students have learned new subject matter. But emergent bilinguals are tested in a static “new language,” an obviously unfair proposition since the “new language” of the test doesn’t correspond to their language repertoire. When emergent bilingual students are very fortunate, they live in states that allow *assessment in a “home language”* or what is usually called a “*native language*”. The problem is that the conceptualization of “home language” also does not take into account the dynamic nature of the use of language by bilinguals, their translanguaging. In reality this “home/native language” of assessments reflects constructions of monolingual nation-states. The emergent bilingual speakers’ repertoire now consists of new features that are being acquired, as well as features that they already had in the repertoire when they arrived in school. The interaction of the features in their complex bilingual repertoire is also ignored in assessment that is said to use “home” or “native languages.”

In the case of both language assessment and content assessment, the inseparability of language from all assessments has important ramifications for both students and teachers. As previously discussed, bilingual students’ complex linguistic repertoire is not taken into account because they are assessed through *monolingual* assessment tools and therefore only viewed through a partial lens which favors the features that have been selected by the state as the “national language.”

But beyond students, teachers of bilingual students and their instruction are also impacted. Many teachers only have access to monolingual assessment instruments. For these teachers, the information gleaned from monolingual assessment does not offer them an accurate picture of their students, thereby curtailing teachers’ understanding of how to teach their students. Before we consider alternatives to the present content and language proficiency assessments by introducing translanguaging in assessment, we review briefly different types of assessments. We do so to point out that all assessments, regardless of whether they are constructed by the testing industry or by teachers are prone to diverge from the theory of translanguaging that we are proposing here. Shifting the language of assessments concerns all of us.

### 3.1 Assessment of students

The difference between language and content assessment that we described above is most important in evaluating bilingual students, and especially emergent bilingual students. Are we assessing students because we want to evaluate what they know and are able to do (content assessment) or are we evaluating their use of national languages (language assessment)? We will return to this important distinction later. Here we summarize distinctions that are important to keep in mind in discussing assessment of all students:

- The difference between large-scale and teacher-produced assessment
- The difference between standardized and non-standardized assessment
- The difference between summative and formative assessment

#### 3.1.1 Large-scale and teacher-produced assessments

Part of teaching has always included assessing whether students have learned. Teachers construct tests to see how well students have learned the material and to evaluate them and assign them scores. Additionally, aside from evaluating students, teacher-produced tests are used to gain important information about student learning. This in turn impacts the quality and appropriateness of instruction.

Teacher-produced tests differ from large-scale assessments in which a sizable population is measured, usually for purposes of comparison or to see whether they have met certain general standards. Large-scale assessments are usually high-stakes meaning that scores are used to make decisions about students’ educational future, and sometimes to evaluate their teachers’ efficiency. In contrast, most teacher-produced assessment is not high-stakes.

#### 3.1.2 Standardized and non-standardized assessments

Standardized tests are scored in a standard manner for purposes of comparison of students. Students answer all test questions or select questions in the same way. Usually standardized tests are large-scale. On the other hand, the purpose of non-standardized assessments is to assess the abilities of individuals and not to offer comparisons. Thus, students can be asked to reply to different questions or conduct different activities. Non-standardized assessments take into account the different levels of achievement of individuals, and are especially useful in assessing oral and writing ability. The use of non-standardized assessments is accepted and widespread in the special education community, where students are assessed according to their own progress.

#### 3.1.3 Summative and formative assessments

Formative assessment is what teachers use to monitor their students’ learning and give feedback (Popham 2008). In contrast, summative assessment is what is used at the end of a period of instruction to determine whether a student has met the standard. Formative assessments are often posed as a promising alternative to the limitations of other forms of assessments for emergent bilingual students. However, the ways in which teachers use formative assessments is critical (Ascenzi-Moreno 2016). Davidson & Leung (2009) point out that although teachers of emergent bilingual students are expected to increasingly rely on formative assessments to guide their instruction, they often lack a solid theoretical base of how language operates in order to make best use of these assessments.

With respect to all of these different types of assessments, educators must understand how the type of assessment matches their intended purpose. The following questions serve as an example: Is it to evaluate a student’s learning and give feedback (formative)? Is assessment meant to learn more about an individual student (non-standardized)? Is it locally made by the teacher (teacher-produced)? In contrast, is assessment used to understand whether a student has met a standard at the end of an instructional unit

(summative)? Is it to compare students (standardized) or large groups of students (large-scale)? These are important questions that all educators need to ask. But besides questioning the purpose of assessment, educators also need to understand the purpose of assessments, which is the subject of the next section.

### 3.2 Language Assessment

Most language proficiency tests focus on discrete skills of *A language* that have been selected by policy-makers with monolingual ideologies. But the testing of language features that are the conventions of the constructed standard language of a nation-state is not the same as testing the full language repertoire of bilingual students.

A true assessment of a speaker's language would instead test whether students are able to use all the features in their language repertoire in order to perform human actions with others and other texts. The emphasis would be on interaction with others in activity (listening, speaking, reading and writing) that would lead to increased understandings and more complex language use, regardless of whether it is done with features that have been pre-selected as the only appropriate ones.

But language assessments, and especially large-scale, standardized summative tests, have traditionally focused on discrete language skills of the "national language," such as vocabulary and grammar (McLaughlin 1984). This is because language standards have not sufficiently moved beyond simple "language" conventions of the nation-state. A case in point is the *English Language Arts Standards* that are part of the *Common Core State Standards* that have been widely adopted by states in the United States (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices 2010). The *English Language Arts Standards* include: *Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking*, and *Language* standards. The Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking standards focus precisely on being able to *use language with purpose*. But the inclusion of specific English Language Standards defeats the attention of language as social and cognitive interaction of the Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking standards. Instead, the English language standards focus on "form." We address this difference in what follows.

The Reading Standards of the US Common Core State Standards focus on providing text-evidence of key ideas, making inferences and identifying main ideas and relationships in complex texts, recognizing the text's craft and structure (chronology, comparison, cause/effect) and associating knowledge and ideas from multiple sources and texts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices 2010). All of this could be tested without regard to the conventions of what is known as "standard English." The Writing Standards focus on being able to produce different text types for various purposes, such as opinion, informative, explanatory and narrative pieces, as well as being able to produce and distribute written texts and conduct research to build knowledge (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices 2010). Once more, this could be assessed without regard to the specific language features of the written texts. Finally, the Speaking and Listening Standards focus on being able to comprehend knowledge and ideas, and present them collaboratively (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices 2010). Yet again, the inclusion of specific language features that make up the

constructed national school language does not figure explicitly in meeting Speaking and Listening Standards.

Alongside Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Standards, the Common Core State Standards include Language Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices 2010). These Language Standards focus on the conventions of standard English grammar and usage, and English vocabulary acquisition and use. Clearly the Language Standards of the Common Core State Standards focus on a constructed school-*English language* and not on the use of language per se. The advances of the Common Core State Standards in embracing language as human interaction are clearly deflated by proposing that essential rules of "English" have to be met in each grade as progression skills. Granted, the acquisition of this "school code/language" by all students is important, but it will never happen for bilingual students if we insist that language is a series of grammatical rules and list of words that can be taught explicitly and acquired sequentially without regard to the "other" features in the entire language repertoire of students.

The Language Standards of the Common Core State Standards frames language as a series of static structures of a language called "English" that can be taught sequentially. As a consequence, teachers often ignore having students practice how to "language" in the complex ways suggested by the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Standards. Because under the Language Standards teachers' understanding of language is limited to fixed structures, they are not able to develop a rich understanding of how emergent bilingual students *language*, which is critical to effectively interpreting and using data from all assessments.

Educators are interested not only in knowing how students are progressing in taking up the language features that make up the school language code, but also in what they know and are able to do, that is, in the content they know. Content assessment is the topic of our next section.

### 3.3 Content Assessment

Students whose language repertoire differs significantly from the features accepted in schools are often given little opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do. The language of the test acts as a barrier that does not allow students to draw on their entire language repertoire and use all their abilities. Many have argued that monolingual testing does not capture the extent of the language and cognitive capacities of bilingual students (see, for example, Abedi / Leon / Mirocha 2003; Fernandez / Boccaccini / Noland 2007). As early as 1984, Cummins had pointed out that assessments had political purposes that worked against the success of language minority students. And in 1994 Valdés and Figueroa had called the monolingual assessment of bilingual students "a special case of bias." Solano-Flores / Bakhoff / Contreras-Niño (2009) have shown how the language used in assessment can impact bilingual students' performance and acts as a mediator in the performance. González (2012) argues not only for the use of the students' home language in assessment, but she comes close to making an argument for translanguaging when she says that allowing emergent bilingual to use "code-switching" and "code-mixing" is advisable because "they allow students to show higher levels of cognitive and language skills, and academic competence" (293). But in the high-stakes testing climate

of the United States, emergent bilinguals are simply being left behind (Menken 2008) and are tested in the use of language features that do not match those in their repertoire.

Many educational authorities have been mindful of the difference between content knowledge and performance in “standard English” for emergent bilinguals (Ábedi et al. 2006; Valdés / Figueroa 1994). New York State, for example, allows emergent bilingual students who are speakers of one of the five highest incidence languages (Spanish, Russian, Chinese (traditional), Haitian Creole and Korean) to take content assessments in their “home language” instead of “English.” Students who speak a different home language from the ones listed above, may receive an oral translation of the test. Although students in New York City are given paper copies of the content assessment in English and their home language, they have to reply in only one of the two “languages.” There are two problems with this solution. One, as we said previously, both “English” and the “home language” are societally constructed and do not always match the language repertoire of students. But even more importantly, for bilingual students the features of their complex language repertoire are always in interaction. Asking them to use only some features, and not others, restricts their ability to show what they know and are able to do (Shohamy 2011). Although this is particularly relevant in the case of emergent bilinguals, this is so for all bilingual students regardless of where they fall in the bilingual continua.

In the case of both language assessments and content assessments, bilingual students are not being assessed adequately because their actual language practices are not matched by the monolingual assessment tools and practices currently used (Sánchez et al. 2013; García 2009). Additionally, as evidenced by the examples of how assessments are used with bilinguals, it is clear that they exist as fixed tools to be implemented rather than as malleable instruments that can be adapted and developed with students in mind.

### 3.4 Translanguaging in assessment

Finding a space for translanguaging in assessment is critical to the valid use of assessments for emergent bilinguals. García has said that translanguaging in assessment is a way to “render the child’s bilingual competence an accepted part of his or her identity and knowledge” (2009: 371). Shohamy (2011) has definitively shown that the assessment of immigrant students’ academic performances on tests administered only in Hebrew in Israel renders the results useless. Her study demonstrated that Russian immigrant students to Israel benefit when allowed to answer questions in Russian *and* Hebrew. The case study of a multidimensional bilingual assessment approach provided in Sánchez et al. (2013) also provides evidence against a single language assessment approach.

Perhaps the boldest step in taking up translanguaging in assessment has been taken by Alexis López and his associates in Educational Testing Service (ETS). López and his colleagues have developed and are piloting a Math test for Spanish-speaking emergent bilinguals in US middle schools (6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade) based on translanguaging (López / Guzman-Orth / Turkan forthcoming). The resources delivered through a computer-based platform (CBT) encourage students to use their language repertoire fully to show what they know. For example, students have the opportunity to see or hear an item in both English and Spanish, and to then write or say responses using their full language repertoire, regardless of what has been constructed as “English” or “Spanish” (López /

Guzman-Orth / Turkan forthcoming ). To create the space for translanguaging and encourage student-to-student interactions, students are asked to select a virtual friend or assistant, while responding to content-related questions. This virtual friend can then, for example, provide a read aloud of the assessment item in the language preferred by the student, ensuring that the student can understand the content-related task. The translanguaged multimodal assessment creates a space for translanguaging by stimulating student-to-student interactions and promoting what López and his colleagues call “bilingual autonomy.” The translanguaged multimodal assessment being developed at ETS may not completely match the complex dynamic translanguaging of bilingual students, but it goes a very long way towards giving bilingual students real possibilities to show what they know and are able to do.

### 3.5 Potential for translanguaging in assessment in a school context

Teachers are the critical link in ensuring that assessments are used for correct purposes and also are reflective of the actual bilingual repertoire of students. However, as many have cautioned (see, for example, Leung / Rea-Dickens 2007), many teachers lack an understanding of language and bilingualism in order to effectively interpret the data from assessments of bilingual students. Additionally, Ascenzi-Moreno notes that teachers’ work and worldview of bilinguals is constrained under the current framework of a national language, with bilinguals seen as parallel monolinguals, rather than dynamic bilinguals who engage in translanguaging practices. Therefore, even formative and teacher-produced assessments which have the potential to be malleable and accommodate bilingual students’ translanguaging practices remain, in practice, monolingual assessment instruments (Ascenzi-Moreno 2016).

When teachers transform assessment through translanguaging, assessment becomes a way for teachers to accurately access student thinking. Ascenzi-Moreno (2012) explored how teachers adapted reading assessments for bilingual students. One of the teachers who was able to do so, explained: “I’m trying to understand his thinking. I’m not getting him to think aloud when I’m asking the questions here [provided by the standardized assessment]. I think allowing him to answer in his home language, allows me to capture his thinking process” (Interview, Classroom Teacher, 04/09). When teachers operate from a framework of language which is dynamic *and* can exert agency in the implementation of assessment, dynamic assessment of bilingual students can better capture what students are thinking, what they know and are able to do. Adopting a translanguaging framework for assessments radically changes the power of an assessment to provide teachers with accurate information with which to craft instruction. This is in contrast to the current use of assessment, which constrains both bilingual students and their teachers. As Sánchez et al. (2013) state, accurate assessment of bilingual students is a question of equity. Transforming assessment through translanguaging is one way of getting a more accurate picture of bilingual students in order to advance their learning.

## 4 Conclusion

The education of bilingual students is a complex task that requires a deep understanding of their language practices. Traditionally assessments have not captured bilingual students' actual abilities and have placed them at a disadvantage by only assessing a portion of their language capabilities (Shohamy 2011: 421). Throughout this chapter, we have argued that an assessment framework which incorporates translanguaging is the only way in which emergent bilingual students can be accurately assessed. By uncovering a translanguaging angle on assessment, we suggest that there is space within assessments for students to demonstrate what they know using their entire linguistic repertoire.

However, for this to occur, we must examine our general use of assessment today. The current use of assessment simply to evaluate and sort students must be overturned. Assessment must become a tool through which teachers exert agency in the education process by using it flexibly to adapt to students' specific educational and linguistic needs, uncover what they know, and teach them appropriately. With respect to this idea, Poehner (2007) references Vygotsky in stating that the "principal responsibility of education is not to document whether learner performance is problematic but to discover the underlying causes for that performance in order to help learners set new developmental trajectories" (2007: 333). When the goal of assessment becomes student learning, rather than the acquisition of *A language* or the classification of students, then the language realities of students will be regarded as essential to the valid assessment of bilingual students.

Transforming assessment through translanguaging needs a multipronged effort, encompassing not only the testing industry, but also educators. Hornberger and Link (2012: 265) hope that "fluid, multilingual, oral and contextualized practices at the local level" have the potential to counter top-down forces that impose monolingual and monoglossic education policies. It is at this local level where teachers must do critical work in both acquiring the knowledge base which reflects bilingual students' languaging, as well as define ways in which assessment can reflect these fluid language realities. Concurrently, policy-makers and producers of assessment materials must take up the challenge of accepting, advocating, and creating assessments which allow for bilingual students to put into place their entire range of linguistic resources when demonstrating what they understand and what they can do. Until assessment instruments and assessment practices reflect this reality, bilingual students will remain unfairly evaluated. It is our hope, that by presenting a theoretical framework for assessment from a translanguaging-angle, further spaces and possibilities for fair, valid, and instructionally-powerful assessments for bilinguals will be created by educators and policy-makers alike.

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