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Translanguaging: a coda to the code?

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ABSTRACT

This coda considers how translanguaging discourse is manifested in classrooms. Li Wei and Lin open up spaces of possibility for translanguaging by questioning the order of language. In so doing, the school code assumes its appropriate place as a system of coloniality.

KEYWORDS

Translanguaging; code; classroom discourse; decoloniality; discourse; first order and second order language; power

Li Wei and Lin have aptly subtitled this issue of *Classroom Discourse*, ‘Pushing Limits, Breaking Boundaries.’ Taking us beyond the present discussions surrounding translanguaging, the contributions in this issue break boundaries in more ways than one. In his article on translanguaging in South Africa, Leketi Makalela reminds us of South African Ubuntu, ‘I am because you are; you are because we are.’ An ubuntu translanguaging philosophy permeates this volume. The issue is dedicated to the memory of Peter Martin, who together with Angel Lin described the benefits of leveraging multilingual pupils’ language practices in post-colonial contexts, even before Cen Williams and Colin Baker had named a similar pedagogical practice as translanguaging. As we push the limits of translanguaging, especially in classrooms, it is important to understand that translanguaging theories did not emerge de la nada/from nothing and from nowhere. We are because some were; and being is always in relationship to others, other times and other contexts. Although this coda is at the end, it should also be considered in dialogue with the many positions taken up in this volume and others in the future. More than a conclusion to a movement, it enacts the *vaivén*, the movement of understandings and struggles that make up our *we/you/I* in the different spaces in which we are positioned.

The concept of translanguaging has emerged to disrupt the naturalization of languages as codes or entities, and especially of the language of schooling, that has served to control material rewards. From its very beginning, education for the dominant classes included the learning of Latin, a code that was not meant to be used in real life, but simply to differentiate social classes. To be educated meant ‘having’ Latin, and later on, it meant having French, and today mostly English, marking French as the code of diplomacy, and English as that of the markets of global neoliberalism. Learning these languages as codes is a mark of privilege. But the foreign language approach to language education, that later on morphed into second language, bilingual education and CLIL approaches, always left room for the dominant classes to also use the language of the nation-state they controlled to speak, read, write, listen and think in other school subjects and spaces. The dominant classes wrote the books used in their schools to reflect their privileged linguistic and cultural practices, their racial images, their

funds of knowledge. For these dominant classes, learning to read and write in school meant to bring themselves into being as advantaged groups, developing subjectivities of power and privilege.

On the other hand, when language minoritized populations were included in education, they were forced to use only the language code supported by the books and schools of dominant populations. With the instructional material, curricula and pedagogies of 'the masters,' they read and wrote themselves as failures. Some bilingual education and second language programs were developed in the late 20th century to address the needs of minoritized and racialized groups that were finally recognized in post-colonial contexts. But these programs also focused on teaching language as codes, as entities that were standardized in authoritative texts that had left out the lives and practices of bilingual minoritized speakers. This has resulted in the many remedial programs for language minoritized youth to take care of what is often referred as their 'word gap,' their lack of 'academic language,' their 'languagelessness' (Rosa 2019). Translanguaging has emerged precisely to disrupt the idea of bilingualism as simply being the addition of two codes, giving space to the dynamic practices of multilingual people all over the world that had been previously overlooked in scholarship.

Translanguaging classroom discourse is not new. It occurs when language dominant students are learning what is considered an additional language. But it is especially when translanguaging comes out of bodies that have been colonized and racialized to be inferior, that it is judged to be inappropriate for learning, and in open conflict with the established monolingual monoglossic language education policy.

In the last ten years, however, what had been previously dismissed as errors, interference, interlanguage, incomplete acquisition, inappropriate, is being turned around by many scholars, mostly bilingual themselves, who have felt their feet, tongues, and lives move in ways other than the monolingual steps or bilingual lock-steps that nation-states and schools prescribe. It is with what Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) refer to as 'the body-politics of knowledge,' understandings derived from experiences as racial/ethnic/sexual/bilingual bodies from the borders, that translanguaging scholarship has emerged.

The translanguaging scholarship included in this issue questions the reasons why in an era where multilingualism has become more visible, language education continues to be monolingual and monoglossic, regardless of whether the program is formally monolingual, bilingual, CLIL, foreign language, heritage language, or any other. The scholarship gathered in this issue bursts the monolingual/monoglossic bubble of a language code that is said to be legitimate in contrast to the language practices of people. It reaches back to past scholarship, and goes beyond the present. It includes primary, secondary and tertiary education. There are cases of translanguaging in rural, as well as urban contexts. Some describe the teaching of language and literacy in many named languages. Other contributions focus on the teaching of content such as science. Some include immigrant students and those who are considered 'heritage speakers,' other contributions focus on language-dominant students, yet others on multilingual students learning through a dominant language or learning a dominant language. By putting alongside each other cases of translanguaging classroom discourse in a variety of educational contexts, this issue brings to life the claim made by Li Wei (2018) that translanguaging can break the ideological divide that continues to sort students into different educational programs. Opportunities to use language in meaningful ways depends then on the category to which students have been assigned. Instead of educating students to acquire and have a specific language code, the emphasis becomes educating ALL students, regardless

of their language practices, to maximize the meaning making, creativity and criticality of their educational experience. Translanguaging focuses on what Li Wei (2018) has called 'linguistics of participation,' as teachers and pupils co-participate in the co-construction of knowledge.

This participation is enacted through a focus on classroom discourse. That is, in centering translanguaging classroom discourse and not translanguaging pedagogical practices or its other-side, learning through translanguaging, Li Wei and Lin avoid the discussion of whether translanguaging can ever be formalized as a pedagogy or as a theory of learning. Instead, the cases here included show the translanguaging discourse that simply exists in classrooms, giving evidence of its presence despite type of program, language policy, subject instruction, or age and type of learners and teachers. By giving voice to translanguaging, the classroom discourse attests to its presence, despite the tensions that it sometimes produces among students, educators and policy-makers.

The contributions here do not simply dismiss the idea of language as code that schools continue to teach and assess. Instead it places this question within the right order – linguistically, semiotically and socio-politically. Drawing on the work of Love (2004), Lemke (2016) and Thibault (2017), Li Wei and Lin propose that translanguaging focuses on the first order of language, the here and now, the real-time activity. At the same time, they acknowledge that there is a second order of language that has to do with cultural processes that occur on a longer timescale. I see this as supportive of former claims we have made in García and Li Wei (2014) and Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015, 2018) that language as code is a sociopolitical construct that has little to do with the languaging of speakers, an activity that is personal, momentary, and that is newly constructed in every single interaction. Rather than the simple coda to a code; the approach taken in this issue dynamizes the code, engages it in a dance of moving back and forth and turning upside-down, cracking its bubble and opening up a translanguaging space of different possibilities.

Within this translanguaging space, the linguistic code no longer holds the first order, as it is involved in a dance with the entire repertoire of multimodal resources that carry particular socio-historical associations, and that highlights, as Li Wei and Lin say 'feeling, experience, history, memory, subjectivity, and culture.' The concept proposed by Angel Lin of trans-semiotizing puts translanguaging in its proper space, in this 'seamless flow of entanglement of multiple meaning making resources,' as speakers become engaged in this 'semiotic assemblage' (Pennycook 2017) that brings together our linguistic ethnographies and experience.

And so the question of what constitutes the real-time activity of language, its first order, is also pierced through with socio-political, historical and structural processes. Latin American decolonial theorists have pointed out that after the elimination of the colonial administration, a colonial power matrix remained (Grosfoguel 2002). In this system of what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000) has called 'coloniality,' the exploitation of labor and the command of colonial authority was substituted by a system of domination about race, sexuality, spirituality, subjectivity, epistemology and knowledge. Race and racism became the organizing principle that structured all the hierarchies of people into superior and inferior, and dismissed others' knowledge as folklore or magic. As race and language became mutually constitutive (Flores and Rosa 2015), language practices of racialized subjects also became dismissed and always deemed inappropriate.

Schools, as instruments of the state, cannot function outside of this colonial power matrix because power is embedded in the state. For this reason, the focus on translanguaging classroom discourse in this issue is most helpful. Translanguaging emerges here not from

the educational system and its actors, but from meaning-making practices of students and teachers who bring forth different epistemologies and knowledges. In the translanguaging classroom other knowledges and linguistic and cultural practices become visible, contributing to an ecology of epistemes where, as Boaventura de Souza Santos (2007) proposes, 'knowledge is interknowledge' (p. 16).

As the concept of translanguaging has been taken up in the scholarly literature, many have interpreted it as simply the use of the students' native or first language in instruction. Others, as 'mixing' or 'switching' between codes. Li Wei and Lin make clear in this issue that this does not constitute translanguaging. Translanguaging is, they say, 'an action to transform classroom discourses.' The dance of translanguaging takes a step beyond those already taken in schools, opening up new caminos/paths that orient us toward new beginnings, but that lay it as open possibilities. With this translanguaging classroom discourse, 'no hay camino' [there is no path], as the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado tells us. Instead, 'se hace camino al andar' [You make the road by walking]. What is important here is to understand that translanguaging can set a new path, one that can only be found as we walk towards an educational system that is not simply a continued mechanism of coloniality, but that makes new paths for others who walk and speak differently.

By starting with the South African context, moving to Asian contexts, then the Americas, and finally Europe, Li Wei and Lin also disrupt hierarchical orders, giving first order attention to post-colonial contexts. Yet, the selection of cases also remind us that language education in these contexts have always included elites who want to acquire a language of power such as English. The articles show that language dominant students wishing to acquire another named language are equally engaged in translanguaging classroom discourse. And yet, that translanguaging discourse is not perceived as inappropriate, but is applauded as coming closer to 'the target' language.

The tension between language education policy and language practices in schools is most visible in post-colonial contexts such as South Africa and Hong Kong. In South Africa, for example, monolingual education policies in the apartheid era, as well as multilingual or multilingual education policies in the post-apartheid era, have neglected the translanguaging of speakers and the dependency between semiotic resources that is embodied in the African value system of ubuntu.

All the cases included in this volume point to the tension between monoglossic monolingual or even multilingual language policies and translanguaging classroom discourse. The fact that language as code has served as a technology of power in a Foucauldian sense (1980) is manifested in the resistance that many language minoritized students have toward translanguaging in classrooms, whether learning science in South Africa or English in Singapore. How to construct a translanguaging safe space continues to be a challenge, as dominant policies and monolingual ideologies exert their power over all speakers. Translanguaging classroom discourses in themselves cannot transform society, but they can crack the rhythm of steps that take us in only one direction, robbing many of opportunities to create their own path to access and freedom.

As we engage in more research in translanguaging classroom discourse, it is important to recognize the fact that the translanguaging dance is not going to be a slow waltz. We are not moving in the same direction, with the same steps, that have been choreographed by schools to use language as a rigid code that include some and exclude others. Rather, translanguaging steps transgress. Translanguaging, like capoeira, the Afro-Brazilian martial

arts dance and music, has been forged in resistance. Translanguaging classroom discourses are ways to resist the repression of mental, spiritual and language and cultural practices that have served to limit educational and societal opportunities of racialized people in a continued coloniality. In translanguaging action, characterized by dynamism, leveraged in multiple spins of multimodal resources, interactions, experiences, and histories, a translanguaging safe classroom space can be created. This space may still be too small to call it transformative, and it might be considered illegitimate in many language education programs. The authoritative code of those considered ‘the masters,’ as an effective technology of power, will resist. And those who are supposed to guard this technology of power and to survey language use in schools will also resist. But as in capoeira, translanguaging arms speakers with ways of kicking back the oppression of their souls and minds that language education has performed in the past.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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