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18 A Sociolinguistic Biography and Understandings of Bilingualism

Ofelia García

18.1 Yo Vengo de Todas Partes

I learned these words when I first went to school in La Habana, Cuba. The verse is from José Martí's *Versos Sencillos*. Martí was a late nineteenth-century Cuban patriot who organized the Cuban War of Independence from Spain, and a major Latin American literary figure and thinker. These verses then became part of the popular song, Guantamera, which I learned to sing in New York, where I have lived since I was eleven years old. The Guantamera that became popular in New York, that of Pete Seeger and later The Sandpipers, was different from that sung by my father in my early youth. The new music and rhythm, and even the Spanish language itself, had acquired a sense of coming "de todas partes," from everywhere. And it was finding my sense of place while surrounded by people and languages coming "de todas partes," that gave me my sense of belonging in the New York City of the early 1960s. It took a long time for me to acquire a sense of valuing my voices "de todas partes," hearing all voices "de todas partes," and especially understanding the relationship between voices heard "de todas partes" and the freedom to go, as the poem continues, "hacia todas partes," toward everywhere. My interest in bilingual speakers and communities comes from this sense of the importance of projecting different voices "de todas partes" in order to create different paths of liberation for language-minoritized speakers.

18.2 Four Scenes

There are four scenes that play in my mind as I think of what has shaped my professional interest in multilingualism in education. In the first, I am an eleven-year-old Spanish-speaking girl, newly arrived in New York. The second scene is that of that same girl in her first year of secondary school, then in her third year. In the third scene, she is now a college student in Spanish class. Finally, in the fourth scene the college student has turned into an



Figure 18.1 With my grandchildren



Figure 18.2 With my advisor Dr. Joshua A. Fishman

inexperienced young teacher standing in front of a classroom. They represent first experiences that have shaped me: the first time I understood English; the first time I realized the impact of curriculum and pedagogy in raising voices; the first time I recognized the pernicious effects of teaching only standardized language; and the first time I understood the importance of bilingualism in education.

18.2.1 Scene 1: Language and Cognition

I sat through classes in the first six months of sixth grade without understanding much of what my English-speaking teachers were saying. I had been a good student in Cuba, so I knew the classroom script. I knew how to behave in school; I copied well from the blackboard; I sat quietly; I did my homework as best I could. I soon made a couple of friends who spoke Spanish like me. One of them, Leonor, was bilingual. One day, I was waiting for Leonor after class as she was talking to the teacher. I didn't understand a word they were saying, but I did understand when Leonor told the teacher, "Don't worry, she's just a stupid Cuban girl." I then comprehended much more than the English language; I understood that speaking Spanish and being Cuban made me stupid in her eyes. At age eleven, I knew that one of my roles in life had to be to make others understand that speaking Spanish and being born in a Latin American country didn't make you foolish and unintelligent.

18.2.2 Scene 2: Testing, Teachers, Curriculum, and Pedagogy

By the time I entered the ninth grade, I spoke English, I thought, well. But the teachers in the high school who tested my English proficiency didn't think so. Of course, I didn't score well enough in the test of English language skills they administered when I entered high school. They placed me in the "slowest" English class. For a year, we did grammar exercises, vocabulary exercises, writing of short paragraphs. We did read novels, but we were encouraged to also read the "SparkNotes": summary notes of the plots of the books. We were tested on the content of the novels: Who was this character? What happened next? When did it happen? Rarely did we engage in any type of critical analysis of the novel: Once in a while a "why question" was asked, but there was little discussion of different options. There was always a right and wrong answer.

In my second year of high school, I had a wonderful teacher. Although she was required to continue the very mechanical language exercises in the curriculum for the "lowest level class," she took an interest in me. Despite what others saw as my "accent" and perhaps my "limited English," she focused on my strengths as a reader. That teacher fought for me and maybe saved me. She went to the principal and demanded that the following year I be moved to the "advanced" English class. When in my third year of high school

I was placed in the "advanced" English class, I thought that everyone was crazy. They were discussing novels as if the characters and situations were real! I had been taught to read fiction just to answer factual questions. The students wrote essays and research papers. I had never been asked for my opinion either orally or in writing. Through that experience, I learned a few things about the inaccuracy of standardized tests, the importance of teachers, and the consequences of curriculum and pedagogy.

Before I had graduated from high school I knew that standardized assessments of language skills were not valid for bilinguals and do not demonstrate what bilinguals know. I also understood that teachers make a difference; they can accept test scores or they can observe students closely and become their advocates. And finally, I knew in my own skin that curriculum and pedagogy make all the difference in learning. Robbing bilingual students of an opportunity to engage in a rich curriculum with exciting ideas and creative and critical opportunities is condemning them to silence. I was convinced then that alternative ways had to be found to assess bilingual students; that teachers had to be taught to not accept students' standardized scores blindly and to become their students' advocates; and that a curriculum and pedagogy either condemn students to silence or liberate their voices as creative and critical human beings.

18.2.3 Scene 3: Teaching the "Standard" Language

After seven years of English language instruction, I took my first Spanish language college course. Even though I lived through Spanish, my college professor told me that my Spanish was "corrupt." I was told that many of the words and ways of using Spanish we used so competently at home as a family and in my bilingual community were "wrong." "You don't say it that way," my teacher, Prof. Bonilla, used to tell me, "That's just the way people speak in the street." How could they be wrong, I asked myself, if everyone says it this way? I realized then that to succeed in teaching a minoritized language, teachers had to validate bilingual students' language practices. Successful bilingualism and biliteracy develop only when teachers can extend the language repertoire that speakers bring, not by eradicating their own linguistic practices.

18.2.4 Scene 4: Bilingualism in Education

I finished college and became a teacher in a New York City community that was heavily Puerto Rican. I was given a sixth-grade class of newly arrived students who were Spanish-speakers. I was supposed to teach all their subjects in English, as well as English as a Second Language. I tried, and failed. After the first month I marched into the principal's office and told him I was going to teach bilingually. It was 1971 and bilingual education was just beginning to emerge as an idea.

“What does that mean?” he asked me. I told him, “I don’t really know. But I know what I’m doing doesn’t make sense. The children don’t understand me. They’re not learning anything. I can do it much better if I make the learning meaningful for them by doing it through Spanish.” I knew from that day forward that teaching had to be about ensuring that students made meaning. This was the beginning of my commitment to bilingualism and bilingual education.

18.3 Multilingualism/Plurilingualism/Heteroglossia: Adding Bilingualism and Translanguaging to the Mix

For those of us in the United States for whom bilingual education was a result of political struggle over the education of language-minoritized students during the Civil Rights era, the word “bilingual” carries a sign of resistance that cannot be eliminated. Dismissing it is to be complicit with the progressive silencing of “bilingualism” that has occurred in the United States as a result of conservative politics, growing xenophobia, discrimination against immigrants, and a neoliberal economy. The word “bilingual” has been silenced in the only US educational programs today that can possibly result in bilingualism: the so-called dual language programs. In accordance with neoliberal economic concerns, these programs not only omit any mention of bilingualism but also demand that they be “two-way,” commodifying the language “other” than English for the benefit of English-speaking students, and robbing language-minoritized students of a way to construct a bilingual identity through their own language practices.

It is critical also to attend to the concept of *translanguaging*, as it is sometimes seen in opposition to the concept of “bilingualism.” But these two concepts only acquire meaning side-by-side. Bilingualism is dynamic, not additive (García 2009). And so bilingualism cannot be solely interpreted through a “bi” lens. Bilingual individuals have a unitary linguistic repertoire, a unitary *internal* system, which goes *beyond* the *external social* construction of two named languages; that is, Spanish, English, Chinese, Russian, Haitian Creole etc. (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015). Bilinguals are always *trans*-languaging, going *beyond* the *named languages* of the “bi-.” Therefore, bilingual education cannot solely strictly compartmentalize the two languages that have been designated as media of instruction. And ALL teachers need to leverage the students’ translanguaging practices.

In particular, education programs that aim to produce or educate bilingual speakers (whether they are formally designated as bilingual, second language, foreign language, or heritage language programs) need to adopt translanguaging curricula and pedagogies (see García and Kleyn 2016; García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2017). A translanguaging pedagogy (www.cuny-nysieb.org) enables emergent bilingual students to incorporate new linguistic features into their existing linguistic system, as teachers leverage bilingual students’ entire

linguistic repertoire, at all times, so as to extend it. Translanguaging makes education more socially just by disrupting the linguistic hierarchies that exist in society and its schools.

Multilingualism in the United States is mostly interpreted as the presence of many different languages in communities and classrooms. In this way, it is similar to the way in which the Council of Europe defines it. But sometimes the concept of multilingualism is applied to students who simply speak more than two languages, a growing population in the United States. And some educators often think of “multilingual” students as simply those who speak languages other than those in which bilingual education programs commonly take place, mostly Spanish. The concept of multilingualism in education has a danger and a promise. The danger, of course, is that students’ dynamic bilingualism and translanguaging is not leveraged in the “English only” English as a Second language “multilingual” classroom to which these students are mostly relegated in the United States. There are, however, teachers who are able to leverage the translanguaging of students in multilingual classrooms (see CUNY-NYSIEB, García and Kleyn 2016; García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2017). These teachers disrupt not only the “monolingual” English-only teaching in classrooms for “multilingual” students but also the static view of “two” languages in many bilingual classrooms. Most students today in bilingual classrooms are speakers of more than two named languages, and yet, bilingual teachers rarely acknowledge linguistic practices other than those of the two named languages of instruction. This is the promise enabled by a translanguaging lens in multilingual classrooms: that all teachers may see the possibility of leveraging all students’ translanguaging, which goes beyond the named language(s) of instruction.

The European concept of *plurilingualism* has had little impact in US scholarship. Epistemologically, plurilingualism and translanguaging have different positions. Plurilingualism holds on to the concept of proficiency in named languages, although it defines proficiency not as something that speakers have, but as what they “do” with language in different communicative situations.

18.4 Heteroglossia and Transfer

Translanguaging rests on the Bakhtinian concept of *heteroglossia*, acknowledging linguistic practices that go beyond those that are constrained by the construct of the named language. But whereas heteroglossia acknowledges the presence of distinct varieties within a single language, translanguaging, by adopting an internalist perspective, questions both the concept of the named languages and the distinct variety.

Translanguaging also clarifies the concept of *transfer* that Jim Cummins (1981) popularized in the context of bilingual education. Cummins’

interdependence hypothesis stated that the language abilities a child learned through one language could be “transferred” to another because of what Cummins posited as the Common Underlying Proficiency. There has long been confusion about what Cummins meant by “transfer,” leading bilingual educators to often ask, “But if I teach them in language X, when will they ‘transfer’ that knowledge to their performance in language Y?” The answer is that they won’t on their own. Transfer does not refer to the individual language features of “named” languages, meaning, for example, that an individual who learns the necessary vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology in Spanish that enables him to speak or write about, say, photosynthesis, will necessarily have the features needed to do so in English or German. So then, what is being “transferred” in Cummins’ model? General linguistic performance (García, Johnson, and Seltzer 2017) includes the ability to use the language features of the speaker’s existing linguistic repertoire to think, find meaning in texts, and produce discourse both oral and written. It is this ability that Cummins might say is “transferable” because it is not “named language-specific.” The Spanish-speaking child who breaks down the cycle of photosynthesis in a Spanish text has general linguistic performance knowledge because he can analyze the task, but may not have the language-specific features to perform that task if the text were in German or English.

So, if language-specific performances are not “transferable” then how should educators support emergent bilingual children’s development of specific named languages? To answer this question, it is helpful to reframe Cummins’ conceptualization through a translanguaging lens.

Instead of transferring, we can say that individuals *do* language (notice the singular in the word “language”), applying what they know about language, generally, to perform linguistically using new features. But since named languages (notice the plural) are a social construction, named languages need to be experienced by new speakers, and the features that identify them as such need to be explicitly practiced and taught. The language-specific performances that require students to suppress some of the features of their repertoire and activate those that correspond to what society calls “another language” are a product of good language teaching. Only by ensuring that bilinguals appropriate the new features as their own will bilingual students feel empowered to use their full language repertoire to act in the world and participate in meaningful ways.

18.5 Language Awareness

Even with the recent focus on English language standards that the Common Core State Standards have recently promoted in the United States, there is little talk in the United States of a *Language Awareness* program of the type

promoted by Eric Hawkins for both students and teachers. In the United States, language is indeed a "loaded weapon" (Bollinger 1980) and schools generally silence inquiries into language.

Because of the monolingual monoglossic ideology that pervades US life, *multilingual language awareness* systems of the type developed by Candelier and others are rare in the United States. Yet, I have argued that "*critical multilingual awareness*" (CMLA), an awareness that goes beyond named languages to the translanguaging of bilingual individuals and communities, is important in education (García 2017). CMLA would help disrupt the current hold that monolingual English language standards have in instruction and assessment in US education.

18.6 Intercultural/Pluricultural/Multicultural Education: Adding Transcultural to the Mix

From the 1960s through the end of the twentieth century, multicultural education in the United States was often seen in contrast to bilingual education. Multicultural education was understood to be what African Americans needed, an education that was culturally relevant, acknowledged the history of slavery, and was often Afrocentric. Bilingual education was understood to be what Latinos needed, an education that was always named as bilingual-bicultural. But with the globalization brought about by a neoliberal economy that encouraged immigration from diverse countries with different cultural and linguistic practices, both multicultural education and bilingual education came under attack. Around the same time, the concept of "culture" itself became questioned by those who had traditionally studied it: the anthropologists.

A generative concept of culture was encapsulated in the concept of *transculturación* proposed by Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940. Ortiz referred to the cultural practices that result from blending those of enslaved Africans brought to the Americas, Europeans who came as conquerors, and Indigenous groups who were subjugated. In this blending, "a new reality emerges, compounded and complex," "a new phenomenon, original and independent" (Ortiz 1940/1978, p. 4). A truly just education for ALL must incorporate all language and cultural practices to *transform* the oppressive educational practices that minoritized groups have received. In so doing, it must disrupt linguistic and cultural hierarchies, while also sustaining home linguistic and cultural practices. This is what Paris and Alim (2014) call "culturally sustaining pedagogy." I see translanguaging as offering education a way of being transcultural.

18.7 Linguistic Repertoire/Communicative Repertoire

My use of linguistic repertoire does not refer to languages and dialects circulating in a community as in Gumperz, but to the unitary internal language

system of individual speakers. A person's linguistic repertoire is made up not of languages or dialects (which are social categories), but of lexical and structural features that make up the speaker's idiolect. Translanguaging is thus defined in Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) as "the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard to the watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages" (p. 281). The idiolect, a person's own unique, personal language, the individual's linguistic repertoire, not only emerges in interaction with other speakers but also enables the person's use of language, as the speaker deploys items selectively depending on interlocutor and context, and also their history.

My use of linguistic repertoire follows Blommaert in focusing on individual speakers and not on communities as did Gumperz. Blommaert sees language as one element of a "communicative repertoire," the term preferred by Rymes (2014), which refers to the ways individuals use not only language but also other means of communication (gestures, dress, posture, accessories). Blommaert (2010) also defines repertoires as the complexes of linguistic, communicative, and semiotic resources that people possess and deploy.

I distinguish between the linguistic repertoire, which is limited to verbal and structural linguistic features, and the full semiotic repertoire. Of course, human beings make meanings through many representational and communicational resources, of which language is but one. But the strong legacy of modernist notions of language and society makes it imperative that we first deconstruct the concept of named languages, especially because it is the instrument used in schools to form subjectivities. Focusing on the linguistic repertoire in adopting a translanguaging approach has enabled me to shed the concept of named languages, while still accounting for it, and has transformed how I think about teaching bilingual children and assessing their language performances.

At the same time, the potential of translanguaging as a sociolinguistic concept, as well as an approach to pedagogy, relies on encompassing a full meaning-making semiotic perspective that focuses on all the resources with which individuals signify, including those within each of them (e.g. the linguistic features of their repertoire), those that they embody (e.g. their gestures, their posture), as well as those outside of themselves that through use become part of their bodily memory (e.g. computer technology). The fact that technology has transformed the media through which we communicate and learn, now multimodal and including, not only speech and writing but also gestures, visual images, etc. means that individual's full semiotic repertoire has to be taken into account in teaching and learning. My point, however, is that because language holds a privileged place in meaning making for individuals and because schools hold on to the modernist notion of the language of the nation-state, it is important that the linguistic repertoire receives the attention it deserves, *primus inter pares*, among all means of signification.

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