DEFINING TRANSLINGUALISM: CROSS-DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

Speaking from our own wheelhouse of composition and rhetoric, the term “translingualism”, translingual scholarship and pedagogy has made a significant wave in composition and writing pedagogy studies since the last nine years or so. Horner et al. (2011) and Lu & Horner (2013) would be commonly identified as two seminal texts that defines what a translingual approach is. In a nutshell, translingualism by Horner, Lu et al. describes language as a social practice that is always emergent, in process, and being remade temporally and spatially. Because language is a practice with an emphasis on the performative under the translingual framework, Horner, Lu et al. describes the relationships between language and language users as mutually shaping and constitutive. Language difference under the translingual framework is the norm rather than a difference/deviation from the norm of Standard Edited English as would be in the English monolingual framework.

Here’s the highlights of what translingualism entails from Horner and Lu et al.’s texts:

- Translingualism treats language practices in a “temporal-spatial frame” that they are always “emergent, in process (a state of becoming), and their relations as mutually constitutive” (587, “Translingual Literacy” 2013).

- Translingualism recognizes difference as the norm, to be found not only in utterances that dominant ideology has marked as different but also in utterances that dominant definitions of language, language relations, and language users would identify as “standard” (585, “Translingual Literacy” 2013).

Since the publication of these seminal texts on translingualism, an emerging body of work on translingual studies has been increasing in composition scholarship (See for example, Special Issue of College English on Translingualism; Bou Ayash 2016; Donahue 2016; Gilyard 2 016; Lee 2016; Canagarajah 2013; Cooper 2014; Horner & Kopelson 2014; Horner & Trimbur 2002). While the authors’ efforts to develop the translingual theory and framework have been to explicitly counter the English monolingualism prevalent in the U.S., we also want to suggest that language and race relations, specifically linguistic white supremacy, is part of the dominant ideology that translingualism or any other progressive theoretical framework on language should grapple with and address in developing the theory and pedagogical work of teaching writing and language.

Related to the translingual theoretical building, we also want to acknowledge that Vershawn A. Young, a scholar on composition and African American literacy, has argued for “code-meshing” which means two or more different languages or dialects are “used simultaneously in one act of speech or writing” (xxiii, Code-Meshing as World English).

Applied linguistics is also a field closely related to composition and rhetoric that has developed post-structuralist conceptions on language. Pennycook (2010), for example, states that language cannot be conceptualized (and thereby taught and learned) as a static, monolithic entity with solid boundaries. Canagarajah, an applied linguist and composition/literacy scholar, also defines the translingual orientation with two key concepts: “communication transcends individual languages”; and “communication transcends words and involves diverse semiotic resources.
and ecological affordances” (6, Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations).

In the education field, Ofelia García, for example, argues for “translanguaging” as an approach to “the use of language, bilingualism and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire” (2, Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective).

With this note, we want to distinguish translingualism/translanguaging from the notion of ‘code-switching.’ Please see below what Christina Celic and Kate Seltzer, two education scholars, said about this in “Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators,” which is linked on our Additional Resources page.

**BUT ISN’T TRANSLANGUAGING WHAT OTHERS CALL “CODE-SWITCHING”?**

Absolutely not! Notice that translanguaging is not simply going from one language code to another. The notion of code-switching assumes that the two languages of bilinguals are two separate monolingual codes that could be used without reference to each other. Instead, translanguaging posits that bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically to communicate effectively. That is, translanguaging takes as its starting point the language practices of bilingual people as the norm, and not the language of monolinguals, as described by traditional usage books and grammars (1).

-Christina Celic & Kate Seltzer; Translanguaging: A CUNY-NYSIEB Guide for Educators