Language Difference and Translingual Enactments

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In reading over the chapters in this collection, I was struck by the diversity of programmatic and pedagogical initiatives that can fall under the umbrella of translingual. This diversity is not surprising, given both the highly contextualized nature of writing programs, as well as the complexity related to the term translingualism. Paul Matsuda has noted that “a relatively new term, translingual writing is still in search of its own meaning” (Matsuda 2014, 478), and I would modify that statement in regard to these chapters as “translingual programs and pedagogies are still in search of their own practices.” Just as the notion of translingual writing has been adopted, resisted, complicated, and deepened, translingual enactments are experiencing a similar process. I am not implying, however, that these practices are in any way imperfect; quite the contrary, they are significant improvements over what they are replacing. My point is simply that translingual enactments are developmental; due to the entrenched nature of institutional structures, they take a long time to implement, involve a great deal of compromise, and can initially lead to resistance and confusion.

Different perspectives toward translingualism are given in these chapters. In their 2011 College English article, “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach,” Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur note that a translingual orientation includes honoring the ability of language users to employ language for their own purposes, recognizing the variety of languages throughout the world, and working against English monolingualist ideology through teaching and research (Horner et al. 2011, 305). Throughout this piece, they emphasize engagements with language differences: a translingual approach “sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (303).
“Difference as resource” gives writers the agency to negotiate language strategies and repertoires when communicating meaning and identity. It is similar in some ways to the notion of plurilingualism, which Ofelia García explains as “the understanding that language use in the twenty-first century requires differentiated abilities and uses of multiple languages as citizens cross borders either physically or virtually” (García 2009, 54). But a key feature of translanguaging is that all language users are translanguaging, not just those who know more than one language, because all utterances are fluid, relational, and contingent.

Reductive notions of language difference can easily lead to misinterpretations of translanguaging. Horner et al. (2011) emphasize that translanguaging is an orientation toward language rather than a particular type of writing or writers. However, language difference has often come to mean visible language differences, with the result that translanguaging is often associated only with multilingual writers and the marked language “differences” typical of second language or English-dialect writers. As a result, translanguaging has sometimes been conflated with second language writing studies, to the detriment of both. And this focus on only visible language differences reinforces the idea that discourse lacking visible differences (as seen through a monolingual lens) is somehow not different, that instead it consists of an unchanging display of conventional structures aimed at particular audiences.

Two chapters in this volume do much to rectify this reductive notion of translanguaging, in particular with their assertions concerning language difference. In his chapter, Bruce Horner writes that translanguaging is an “inevitable feature of all writing, whatever forms that writing might take. . . . Hence even those utterances that appear merely to reiterate conventional linguistic forms are renewing those forms and thus producing difference by their iteration of these forms in a different spatial and temporal location” (88). A key facet of language as always emergent, always transforming is the coconstitutive nature of rhetorical acts. Juan Guerra and Ann Shivers-McNair note that “difference” is “a contingent iterative performativity” resulting from the “intra-action” of identities (Earad cited in Guerra and Shivers-McNair). Both Horner and Guerra and Shivers-McNair acknowledge some overlap between translanguaging and an accommodationist view of language in that both paradigms desire to honor so-called unconventional language uses. However, translanguaging ideology sees difference as an inherent characteristic of all language practices, even that which appears unmarked by difference. Horner’s “double translation” work with his students helps them see how languages are “complex, indeterminate assemblages of possibilities” (94) and that communicative acts are both iterative and contingent. In this view, “standard” English practices are intrinsically translanguaging, and multilingual students (such as those at my university on the US-Mexican border) might prefer to produce “standard” English in conventional formats, despite their bilingual fluencies. Since no language is isolated from its context and no language iteration is truly the same, the standard English language forms they create are as translanguaging as any overtly code-meshed language.

Since translanguaging is about all language practices, not just those that appear different, administrators and teachers attempting to enact translanguaging must work against common writing program structures in which students are separated into different classes according to language background and measured proficiencies and in which student writing that exhibits marked differences might be valorized but will still be constrained to drafts or minor assignments. In reading the chapters in parts 2 and part 3 of this volume, I was interested in the successful programmatic and curricular engagements described and even more interested in the struggles and tensions encountered. These struggles speak to challenges of changing ingrained monolingual ideologies seldom questioned in the day-to-day activities of program directors and writing instructors.

Two successful attempts to implement translanguaging writing orientations are described in chapters by Katie Malcolm and Aiso Inoue. Both these chapters describe significant changes in writing programs. In Malcolm’s community college, basic writers had been placed in a linear course sequence, a step-by-step approach that assumes rhetorical development is a smooth progression toward “good” writing. Malcolm and her colleagues developed an accelerated program in which students are placed immediately in college-level courses with a studio course as a corequisite. White accelerated learning programs have become fairly common, the focus in these programs has been on increasing the pace at which students are allowed entry into college-credit classes. In contrast, in her chapter Malcolm concentrates on students’ language dispositions. Malcolm gives examples of students’ negotiating conventional essay formats and language structures through online and class discussions, writing that “the institutional thirdspace of English 100 allowed us to critically examine”—for college credits—the various ways UCC defined “writing” [and] how the students could turn to one another and themselves as writing resources” (115). Conversations in class and online showed that students became more self-reflective readers and writers, more prone to questioning conventional academic discourse, and more confident about their language use.
Like Malcolm, Inoue in his chapter demonstrates how programmatic changes can create conditions for translingual practices. In his view, “Translingualism itself is a call for new and better ways to conceive of and practice the assessment of student writing in college and secondary classrooms” (121). Inoue argues that directed self placement (DSP) and labor-based contract assessment help create practices that are translingual in nature. Rather than course placement being determined according to linguistic “adequacy,” DSP allows students to select their own placement level. Grading contracts in which students negotiate how much work they will accomplish in a course replaces evaluations driven by predetermined standards. Since grades are not based on a preconceived notion of writing quality, students’ histories and backgrounds can be valued, not judged, and teachers and students can work together as the writing evolves. According to Inoue, both DSP and labor-based grading contracts promote a more critical stance toward language: “Fairness comes from not ranking but considering language performances on more critical terms that embrace failure as places of negotiation, discussion, and potential” (133). I imagine a key feature of the success of contract grading in particular is the preparation of teachers, for teachers (and their students) are likely to insert their ingrained ideas about language standards even in an assessment system grounded in more critical perspectives on language.

Inoue focuses on a writing-assessment ecology that encompasses classrooms and programs—and, I would add, larger administrative structures in which programs operate. The different components of a writing program (individual students and teachers, labor contracts, textbook decisions, pedagogy courses, curriculum committees, budgetary practices, and so on) are also located within the ecology of the larger field of rhetoric and composition. In their chapter, Dy'an Dryer and Paige Mitchell situate the challenges they faced enacting a translingual pedagogy not only within their largely white, rural, New England campus but also within the discipline of rhetoric and composition, which turned away from issues of language several decades ago in what is commonly described as the social turn. They acknowledge that their initial foray into translingualism, in which they combined domestic and international students in the same classroom, resulted in misunderstandings. However, they persevered, and change started to slowly happen: they introduced translingualism to teaching assistants; experimented with course readings and sequencing; intervened in peer-review interactions to encourage risk taking and openness; and worked to interrupt instructors' habituated reading practices that tended to implicitly or explicitly penalize visible language differences. Their attention to the practices of raters evaluating student portfolios is especially illustrative of the challenge of dislodging a view of language as static, contained, and nontexual. As they emphasize, “Translingual pedagogies like the one we’ve described here ask us to attend to the word-and-phrase levels of meaning as students work across language relations” (137). This was work their portfolio raters initially were unprepared to do.

In their chapter, Chris Gallagher and Matt Noonan highlight what they call a “Shaughnessy moment” that seems similar to the experiences of Dryer and Mitchell when working with portfolio raters. Referring to Mina Shaughnessy’s sense of desperation when she read her CUNY student essays, Gallagher and Noonan recall their instructors’ “feeling of being utterly out of [their] depth”(166) when reading essays from students who were able to self-select their writing courses, students who otherwise would have been isolated from “regular” composition. At this point in Gallagher and Noonan’s discussion, practicing translingualism seems to mean attending to visible language differences in multilingual students’ writing, a topic the field of second language writing has examined in depth. However, the authors note that theirs is a “a story of learning to do” translingualism in our particular institutional context and with (and from) our particular students” (182). As their program continued to change, the notion of translingualism became more complex as the authors came to perceive translingualism as pertaining to all students; significantly, they began to think of it as a reading practice that involves attending to the linguistic and modal movements within texts. Their story, they write, is still evolving: “This learning process has no end. And that’s a good thing” (176).

Gallagher and Noonan introduce their translingual work as a reaction to their institution’s efforts to brand itself as global, something many schools are doing in order to attract more international students and maintain their competitive status. While the adoption of the global within the higher education industry in the United States might make the field of rhetoric and composition more open to attending to language, the novelty of the global move can obscure important ethical considerations. Some institutions, for instance, are accepting large numbers of international students without providing resources for helping those students achieve basic English-language proficiency. The tendency is to celebrate obvious differences in language, appearance, and customs without critically studying the power dynamics in which languages are enmeshed. Patricia Bizzell’s chapter on English in Korea is a good example of how English, a language traditionally associated with the global powers of
First Circle countries, is not owned by any particular country or group of people but rather is being managed and altered in localized settings. Furthermore, while languages are a social construct, they are also what Alastair Pennycook has called "sedimented products of repeated acts of identity" (Pennycook 2007, 13). The chapter in this volume by Sara P. Alvarez, Suresh Canagarajah, Eunjeon Lee, Jerry Won Lee, and Shakil Rabbi gives examples of the interplay between identity and language as the authors describe how they have experienced, resisted, transformed, and concede to traditional categories of ethnic identity as related to their language practices. Most striking to me is the authors' descriptions of uptake, of how their translanguaging practices were perceived by others. Often, translanguaging is a powerful way to perform a desired identity, but it also can lead to being ascribed an undesired identity, as it does for Jerry Won Lee, who is frequently perceived as being ABC (American-born Chinese). As noted in the conclusion, "Jerry's narrative therefore shows identity is not constructed through language resources alone... Sometimes we become ethnicized by others in ways we may not always expect or even comprehend" (44). Translingual practices cannot be isolated from the cultural, material, and social contexts in which they exist.

These chapters on translanguaging in writing programs and pedagogies demonstrate the imperfections and even hazards of these enactments in a field that for so long neglected language as a part of rhetoric. Perhaps the most effective way to enact change is to improve the graduate programs in rhetoric and composition that prepare future writing and rhetoric professionals. While graduate students read an article or two about translanguaging in their coursework, the programs in which they are enrolled still remain stubbornly monolingual English and US-centric in their orientations. To challenge monolingual ideologies in graduate programs, critical language theory, drawn from scholarship in applied linguistics and education, can be integrated into core classes. Students can learn about critical discourse analysis, ethnography, and other research methodologies appropriate for research into language practices in educational and community contexts. Students can be given the opportunity to write theses and dissertations that are multilingual and multivocal.

However, contesting monolingual language ideologies in graduate programs will not be easy, particularly in those plagued by tensions over specializations and turf. A zero-sum attitude toward curricular change can make faculty worry that if language is foregrounded, another topic will be eclipsed. Because translanguaging tends to be connected to only language-minority or ESL students, faculty wishing to do translanguaging might be kept apart from the "real" work of teaching rhetorical theory and history into which language issues seldom intrude. Finally, questions might arise about how well a translanguaging approach can prepare students for the job market: will students be hired if they espouse "radical" changes in writing programs? No doubt there will be resistance to changing graduate programs, just as there is resistance to changing writing programs.

Other areas related to translanguaging must be explored. For instance, more attention must be devoted to developing a critical awareness of "conventional" language and how communicators negotiate language norms. And as Cindy Selfe (2014) has said, there are clear connections between translanguaging and multimodal communicative practices that must be studied. Scholarship from the field of second language writing can help administrators and writing instructors work more effectively with second language writing students. Translanguaging as a practice is just beginning to take shape, and as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, good work is starting to be done.

Notes
1. For an explanation of the problems that this conflation has caused, see Dwight Atkinson et al. (2015).
2. Throughout this response I am using monolingual only as a convenience. No language practice is truly monolingual.

References
Selfe, Cynthia L. 2014, "The Disciplining Disposition of Print." Presentation at the Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Indianapolis, IN.