Taking Translingual Scholarship Farther

Suresh Canagarajah¹ · Xuesong Gao²

Published online: 6 March 2019

© National Taiwan Normal University 2019

The articles in this special topic issue take the conversations on translingualism in much-needed scholarly and pedagogical directions. This introduction situates the articles in the broader disciplinary context to understand their significance.

Translingual practices have been studied largely by scholars working in Anglophone universities. The leading proponents of this model come from the UK (for example, Li Wei), the USA (Ofelia Garcia, Suresh Canagarajah), and Australia (Alastair Pennycook). Understandably, the students and colleagues of these leading scholars have also made important scholarly contributions from their universities. Note that these are all English-dominant countries. Others in Europe, such as Jan Blommaert in Belgium, have also produced influential scholarship on other European languages. However, this situation has led to some imbalance in knowledge production.

To begin with, translingual scholarship has focused largely on how diverse languages mesh with English. Though the dominance of English as a global language does involve an important consideration in any cross-language relationship or language contact situation, it begins to appear that translingualism means “English+.” That is English plus another language. As we can infer, the dominance of English is boosted when we consider languages diversity only in relation to English. It is important to consider a larger range of languages, often interacting with each other without the presence of English. In recent times, scholars in East Asia have brought to our attention on how professional and academic contexts involve language contact between Asian languages, such as Chinese and Japanese.

In order to undertake studies on the contact of a wider range of languages, we also have to expand the scholarly gaze to communities and contexts outside the Euro-

✉ Suresh Canagarajah
asc16@psu.edu

Xuesong Gao
xuesong.gao@unsw.edu.au

¹ Departments of Applied Linguistics and English, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, USA

² School of Education, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

American scholarly centers. There are limitations on the generalizability of translanguaging when only communities in ESL (English as a second language) situations are considered. Some critics could argue that it is easy for multilingual users of English as a second language to code mesh and translanguage, because they bring a fairly good proficiency in English. It could be argued that communities in which English is a foreign language (EFL) might find it less easy to shuttle in and out of English, as their access to English is limited. The articles in this issue consider translanguaging in many EFL communities, such as Taiwan, China, and the United Arab Emirates. The ability of these speakers to translanguage with English shows considerable creativity and adept new communicative practices.

The scholarship so far has also focused considerably on everyday social settings, such as markets, social media, hip hop, and youth culture. Some scholars have argued that such settings are less regulated by restrictive language policies. Therefore, they have considered them fertile places to study translanguaging creativity. Similarly, in educational settings, scholars have studied early education contexts and low stakes activities such as informal classroom interactions, multimedia presentations, and online interactions. These studies might give the misleading impression that translanguaging is permissible only in low stakes communicative contexts. The articles in this volume consider translanguaging in higher educational contexts. They also take into consideration high stakes academic writing and communication in such contexts. These studies demonstrate how translanguaging can be a resistant and creative strategy even in institutions regulated by restrictive norms. Take note that many of these communities adopt an EMI (or English Medium Instruction) policy. It is understandable that many EFL countries perceive English as linguistic capital and train their students in that language. However, the articles in this volume demonstrate how the language repertoires students bring with them can play a positive function in education and also facilitate English language proficiency.

The articles in this volume counter the notion that translanguaging communication is a homogeneous product or system. This has led to skeptics wondering if translanguaging communication merely involves sprinkling lexical items from diverse languages to make the text or conversation exotic. It is important to remind that translanguaging is a *practice*. Even when the text appears to approximate a standardized variant of a language, the finished product would have involved shuttling across diverse languages in one's cognitive process and social networks to generate the ideas and sharpen the text. Therefore, we have to focus on the practices that characterize translanguaging.

Such a focus on practices will also correct the frequent misunderstanding that translanguaging involves disregarding the established norms of communication in specific situations. Nothing can be further from the truth. Language and communicative norms are important. What translanguaging conceptualizes is the ways in which multilingual users creatively and strategically renegotiate the norms for voice. Therefore, while many settings studied in the following articles involve EMI contexts, what the researchers show is that students and scholars adopt translanguaging practices to create incremental spaces for representing their knowledge and identities more effectively.

The articles in this issue not only focus on practices, but they also throw light on the diversity of practices scholars and students adopt in different settings as appropriate for their purposes. It is important to pay attention to the practices that are effective in different settings, given the language norms and conventions in each situation. The

survey of practices and strategies adopted in translingual interactions is still inadequate. The articles in this issue present a wonderful range of strategies students and scholars use in higher educational contexts. They involve shuttling between different modalities (oral, aural, and visual) and media (internet, conversations, and texts) for more effective learning and communication.

It is high time we took translingualism beyond a fashionable academic idea to treat translingualism as a diverse and strategic social practice. When we adopt this orientation, we may find that the strategies and products that are possible in different contexts are variable. Multilingual users adopt forms of communication that are appropriate and feasible in their own settings. An understanding of these strategies will enable us to also devise suitable pedagogies for different contexts. We hope that the articles in this issue provide such knowledge as to take translingual scholarship farther and also devise effective and contextually relevant pedagogies for higher educational contexts.