



## Translingual context zones: Critical reconceptualizing of teachers' work within the context of globalism



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### ABSTRACT

The authors draw on [Blommaert's \(2010\)](#) concept of mobile semiotic resources and [Canagarajah's concept of translingual contact zones \(2013\)](#) to argue that the articles in this special edition of *Linguistics and Education* push forward the boundaries of the interdisciplinary fields of critical applied linguistics and research in teacher education by placing the work of teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers in the center of semiotic analyses of language education in the context of globalism. Based on this discussion, the authors call for a reconceptualization of teachers' work from a critical language awareness perspective.

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### Introduction

The articles in this special edition of *Linguistic and Education* center on the uses of critical language awareness (CLA) perspectives as enacted in pedagogical practices situated geographically in the Americas involving global participants. Collectively, these articles explore a broad range of important and intractable conceptual, pedagogical, and ethical problems related to language, race, class, gender, and national identity in the interdisciplinary fields of sociolinguistics, critical applied linguistics, multicultural education, literacy development, and teachers' professional development. Taken collectively, these articles push forward the boundaries of these interdisciplinary fields in a number of crucial ways that have the potential to inform a more robust agenda regarding transforming power dynamics in institutional contexts so these power dynamics might better serve a social justice agenda. One of the distinguishing features of this special edition is how the authors' conceptions of CLA place the work of teachers and teacher educators in the center of semiotic analyses of language education in the context of globalism. The articles taken as a whole, therefore, call for a reconceptualization of teachers' work. Specifically, the authors draw on a critical perspective of language, learning, and social change at all levels of education through research projects conducted in collaboration with pre- and in-service teachers in multilingual contexts using the tools of CLA. In doing so, the authors shunt back and forth in their roles as critical linguists, educational researchers, and teacher educators. Applied to theorizing teachers' work in the context of global semiotic flows, this perspective warrants a commitment to analyzing how semiotic movements play a role in the construction of self-other dynamics through pedagogic interactions in classrooms and in on-line educational contexts. It also requires attention to the production and reproduction of the knowledge base of teaching and learning in rapidly changing, multilingual, and institutionally complex schools. And

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last, this perspective demands an analysis of the production and reproduction of ideologies related to politics of difference in teachers' day-to-day work and in research practices related to teacher education. Clearly, no one article is capable delivering on all of these commitments. However, by individually exploring important research questions using varied conceptions of critical language awareness and research methods, these studies complement one another and, collectively, provide insights that support the development of a research agenda aligned with these ambitious commitments (e.g., Alim, 2005; Blommaert, 2010; Canagarajah, 2013; Clark, Fairclough, Ivanic, & Martin-Jones, 1990; Clark, Fairclough, Ivanic, & Martin-Jones, 1991; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García, 2009; Martin, 2009; Pennycook, 2006).

In an attempt to respond critically to these very diverse projects, we find Blommaert's (2010) concept of *mobile semiotic resources* useful. Specifically, the contexts in which these studies were carried out can be characterized as discursive spaces where linguistically diverse students', teachers', teacher educators', and researchers' historically constructed and physically embodied "mobile resources" meet, collide, and/or fail to be recognized and therefore become "immobile resources" as participants (including the researchers) moved across complex social, institutional, economic, and political boundaries (p. 1). Blommaert writes that individuals, in this case elementary and secondary students, pre- and in-service teachers, teacher educators, and the researchers,

...manage or fail to make sense across contexts; their linguistic and communicative resources are mobile or lack such *semiotic mobility* [emphasis added], and this is a problem not just of difference, but of inequality. It is a problem exacerbated by the intensified processes of globalization. (p. 3)

In further explaining this understanding of "mobile semiotic resources" in ways that provide a useful frame for reflecting on the contributions of each article, Blommaert (2010) argues that globalization entails the movement of people across spaces that have always been someone else's space (p. 6). They are therefore "filled with norms, expectations, and conceptions regarding what counts as proper and normal (indexical) language and what does not count as such" (p. 6). Semiotic mobility in this sense is "a trajectory through different stratified, controlled, and monitored spaces in which language always 'gives you away'" and locates you in a particular subjectivity, role or identity in sometimes insignificant and sometimes highly consequential ways (p. 6).

In further developing the concept of mobile and immobile semiotic resources for language educators, Canagarajah (2013, pp. 6–7) contributes the term *translingualism*. This concept amalgamates the critical sociolinguistics of Blommaert's (2010) with Pratt's (1991, p. 31) concept of "contact zones" to analyze social spaces where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (cited in Canagarajah, 2013, p. 30). The contact zones explored in this volume are exactly these kinds of post-colonial, post-slavery, and, we would add, post-industrial contexts. They are historically translingual spaces occupied by Latino heritage speakers of Spanish in California; pre-service teachers exploring conceptions of whiteness and blackness in their teacher education programs in North America; a history teacher and his high school students analyzing primary source texts related to war in Texas; speakers of varieties of Arabic analyzing science texts in an economically struggling former industrial city in Michigan; teachers of Quechua to Spanish speaking students in urban schools in Peru; and international teaching assistants in a graduate program in North America. In using Blommaert's formulation of embodied mobile semiotic resources and Canagarajah's concept of translingual practices, we discuss each study briefly by characterizing the nature of the semiotic movements and contact zones each created and what each offers to the advancement of a critical language awareness perspective for teaching and learning in the context of globalization and for reconceptualizing the knowledge base of teaching. In making these comments, we draw on our own semiotic resources as white, middle class, U.S. born, former public school teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers. Meg Gebhard, the first author, comes from a small, once thriving factory town in rural upstate New York, a town that in the 1900s was shaped by a growing Italian immigrant population that moved into a manufacturing and farming economy run primarily by people of Northern European decent. The high school in this town now only has a 66% graduation rate and the vital main street that once existed is now mostly boarded up except for the army recruiting office. Jerri Willett, the second author, grew up in the segregated South where she attended eight different elementary schools. Her family of nine finally landed in a rapidly-growing, linguistically-diverse neighborhood in Miami, Florida. As an adult, she has crossed numerous translingual contact zones, including teaching in polyglot schools in Northern California, France, Northern England, Hong Kong, Mexico, and Massachusetts while exploring the cultures, languages, and literacies of French, Cantonese, Spanish, early Medieval English, African American Vernacular English, and various Southern American and British Englishes. Drawing on our collective mobile semiotic resources and the literature in CLA, we conclude our review of these studies with some comments regarding using CLA to reconceptualize the knowledge base of teaching in globalized translingual context zones.

#### *CLA in translingual contact zones*

An example of Blommaert's conception of embodied semiotic mobility is found in Colombi's description of the carefully designed contact zones she created for heritage language learners of Spanish at the college level in California. The theoretical rationale for this course rests on an explicitly critical instantiation of Halliday's theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as both a social theory and as a framework for teaching languages and about language variation in the context of globalism. The translingual context of California, as Colombi makes clear, has historically been a contact zone between Spanish speaking missionaries and indigenous people in the mid-1500s and has steadily become a battle ground for attacks on bilingualism

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