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“It was kind of a given that we were all multilingual”: Transnational youth identity work in digital translanguaging

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the framework of translanguaging, this case study counters the notion of separatism in one's multilingual competency as developing separate monolingual capacities in different languages. Building from definitions and integration of theories from translanguaging and digital literacies in the context of transnational connectivity, and using the methodological tools of discourse analysis, this ethnographic case study examined how the case youth drew upon her entire semiotic repertoire in digital spaces to materialize relationships and identities across her local and transnational social fields. Specifically, analyses of the three translanguaging examples demonstrate how the youth progressively expanded her translanguaging scope across contexts of classroom, transnational family, and multilingual youth community, endorsing how the translanguaging approach affords a more comprehensive look into the transnational youth's literacy development and identity work.

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1. Introduction

Jenna, a Korean migrant¹ youth living in the U.S, was sitting with her sister, video-recording a new year's greeting message for their extended family in Korea. Occasionally she giggled, unable to find appropriate Korean words, but soon managed to say that she and her sister would show a few short comic videos for the family to enjoy. These videos featured the two girls' comic performances in both Korean and English, and across written, oral, and gestural modes such as practiced honorific Korean diction, New Year's bow, *Gangnam Style* dance moves, and English caption as translation. On another occasion, Jenna was creating videos as her school assignment, this time using mostly English and various photo images for her local audience: classmates and teacher. Topics varied from her daily exercises (e.g., Taekwondo and ballet) and mini medical research about cracking joints to the issue of identity change over time. During the same period, she was also engaged in a social

media site, *Google+* where she had many conversations with her online “friends,” sharing similar interests, challenges, and using her multilingual capacity to command Korean language, English, and creative emoticons for communication.

This snapshot of Jenna's digital literacy practices between 2013 and 2014 reflects many migrant youths' transnational communication, which I call *translanguaging* in this paper. These youths' life fields are not confined to the immediate physical locale of living but span multiple places across local, transnational, and global affiliations. They use varying communication technologies to develop and sustain daily relationships, like Jenna did through video messaging and social media conversation. As digital literacies of youth have drawn growing attention from scholars with new discussions for 21st century literacy education, they have contributed to setting a broader definition of literacy as sociocultural practices of identity work (Kress, 2003; Luke, 2003; New London Group, 1996). However, the impact of the transnational connectivity on identity construction of youth especially from transnational families is still an area that calls for more empirical research (Lam, 2009; Li and Zhu, 2013). Korean migrant youth group is one such population for whom very little research exists (Gwak, 2008) and yet Korean migrants and their children have increasingly settled in locations like California or cities like Chicago (Min, 2011) and beyond such typical immigrant destinations (Terrazas, 2009). Given that these youths and/or their parents came from Korea, a country where over 63% of the whole population and 95% of youth of age six to 29 engage with World Wide Web on a daily basis (Lee,

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¹ In this article, I use the term “migrant” instead of “immigrant” to recognize the increasing bi-directional movement of the contemporary migrant people whose settlement pattern does not match with the previous generation immigrants who, once settled in the host countries, did not have substantial opportunities to visit or communicate with people and cultural events in their home country. Specifically, I recognize that new communication technologies have facilitated migrant people's bidirectional mobility across their host and home countries beyond geographical limitation.

2006) and potentially communicate transnationally, research on how transnational digital engagement has mediated their identity work is of particular urgency and importance.

As part of a larger ethnographic project on a group of Korean youth in a U.S. Midwestern city (Kim and Dorner, 2014; Kim, in press), this case study examines one transnational youth's digital translanguaging practices, with a focus on how the youth drew from a complex semiotic system to communicate with local and transnational audiences. By translanguaging, I refer to the multilingual's flexible use of his/her full semiotic system for communication (García and Seltzer, 2016; Li, 2011a). This paper integrates theories of translanguaging with the literature on digital literacies to explore the following research questions: How do transnational youth draw upon their entire linguistic repertoires or "translanguage" in digital spaces? In turn, what does translanguaging afford? How does translanguaging differ across different contexts and audiences? Adopting theories of translanguaging provides a framework, which helps to explore exactly how youth/individuals move flexibly among many modes, which exist as a total semiotic repertoire rather than as compartmentalized language abilities as shown in the separatist view of one's multilingual competency as moving between separate linguistic systems.

After a review of research on translanguaging, this study presents an analysis of three digital translanguaging practices by Jenna (pseudonym), a bilingual Korean migrant student in the U.S. Jenna was selected from the larger project for this report because her data set demonstrated the most extensive corpus of literacy events and items among all participants. In addition, focusing on one youth allows a deeper look into such translanguaging practices. Most significant, the three samples chosen for analysis illustrate the spectrum of the youth's translanguaging repertoires, which include a combination of vocabularies both in English and Korean and across multimodal channels of speaking, writing, visual images, sounds, and gestures. In conclusion, this analysis argues that translanguaging frameworks provide a more comprehensive look into transnational youth's literacy development and identity work, as we can see how youth purposefully choose particular communication modes across their linguistic and digital repertoires within particular audience relationships. Implications for the study of literacy education will be discussed.

2. Framing the study

The overarching framework of this study is translanguaging, an emerging concept to understand multilinguals' language use in its holistic sense, departing from the separatist view which conceives multilingualism as shuttling between two or more separate linguistic systems (Li, 2011a). Instead, multilinguals draw from one integrated semiotic repertoire of sign systems including language. Translanguaging practices are more salient among people from transnational backgrounds and in the digital space which provides them with access to, and resources to draw from, their multiple cultural and linguistic communities of affiliation (Lam and Warriner, 2012; Warriner, 2007). Such perspectives highlight the dialogic nature of digital translanguaging in terms of building relationships with diverse audience groups. That is, how to connect and communicate with the immediate or presumed audience in digital writing is a crucial component in the writer's modulation of topics, mediums, and identities.

In turn, building from these definitions and integration of theories from translanguaging and digital literacies, this review argues that discourse analysis allows for a close examination of such dialogism in youth's translanguaging practices. Indeed, using Norman Fairclough's (2010) approach, we can show how youth enact particular ways of *interacting*, *representing*, and *being* in relation to their

audience(s) through fine-grained analyses across lexical, grammatical, and multimodal levels (Rogers, 2011). The following sections define and relate the key framing concept, *translanguaging*, to the situated context of the study: transnational literacies through communication technologies, dialogic intertextuality, and discourse analysis of multimodal ways of being, interacting, and representing.

2.1. *Translanguaging: from separation to integration*

The term *translanguaging* in this article draws from Li Wei's (2011a) definition to encompass its evolving and expansive notion and practices:

translanguaging is both going between different linguistic structures and systems, including different modalities (speaking, writing, signing, listening, reading, remembering) and going beyond them. It includes the full range of linguistic performances of multilingual language users for purposes that transcend the combination of structures, the alternation between systems, the transmission of information and the representation of values, identities and relationships (p. 1223).

Originally, the term *translanguaging* came from the Welsh-English classroom bilingual practices in which students drew on different languages to learn and produce outcomes (Hornberger and Link, 2012); later, it was expanded to generally refer to multilingual practices in and outside of the classroom context. However, it does not simply mean shuttling between or mixture of different languages, connoted in the term *code-switching* as parallel monolingualisms, that is, building and operating in two separate first and second language systems in one person (Creese and Blackledge, 2010; Grosjean, 1989). García and Seltzer (2016) explained the concept through a simpler analogy of using a smartphone keyboard to differentiate between code-switching and translanguaging:

When typing or texting, your smartphone allows you to change or switch languages simply by pressing a key and switching your keyboard, following the concept that there are named languages. But when bilingual speakers use their phones to text with other bilinguals, they use their entire language repertoire of features, their own language, with some words and phrases associated with one named language and other words and phrases associated with the other. Translanguaging is the ability to precisely ignore this kind of language function on the smartphone, and to use all language features fluidly because they are part of the bilingual speaker's repertoire. (p. 22)

Likewise, Lewis, Jones, and Baker (2012) view translanguaging as "essentially sociolinguistic, ecological, and situated" (p. 659), focusing on the process of one's flexible and integrated language use across contexts. The bilingual's practices are then "acts of feature selection" from a "unitary collection of features" in one's full linguistic system rather than a multilingual switch between two separated grammar systems (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 281).

Therefore, the newly constructed meaning through translanguaging cannot be simply assigned to one language or another, and goes beyond the limited view of one language for one identity (Canagarajah, 2013; García and Li, 2014; García, 2009). For example, Canagarajah's (2011) study illustrates how a college student *meshed* or mixed multiple language resources (Arabic, English, and French) and modalities across the visual, lexical, and textual levels to communicate messages for multiple possible audiences. According to Li Wei (2011a), such translanguaging enables the multilingual to bring multiple dimensions of "personal history, experience, and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into one coordinated and meaningful performance, and making it into a lived experience"

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