



# The transformative limits of translanguaging

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## ABSTRACT

The implementation of translanguaging at school is often seen to have transformative capacities: it will release bilingual subjectivities, and change unequal social structures. In this paper I argue that translanguaging is likely to be less transformative and socially critical than is suggested, because translanguaging research has more in common with the monolingual authorities it criticizes than it may seem, because it trades on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted, and because translanguaging, in some of its representations, is becoming a dominating rather than a liberating force. This does not detract from the value of translanguaging research, nor from the importance of reconciling schools with linguistic diversity. But it may imply arguing this transformation from a different tack.

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## 1. Introduction

Translanguaging has in recent years become a popular scientific concept in socio- and applied linguistics. What was only known in Welsh until less than 20 years ago is now a household name in international conferences, symposia and summer schools, and the central topic of highly cited publications (Canagarajah, 2013; Creese and Blackledge, 2010; García, 2009; García and Wei, 2014; Hornberger and Link, 2012; Li Wei, 2011). If hits on google mean anything, translanguaging today has some 300.000 of these (September 2017), which is less than the score for superdiversity (370.000) or code-switching (500.000); but it quite beats the numbers of rivalling terms like codemeshing (50.000), metrolingualism (43.000), or poly-languaging (a meagre 3.500). Popular new concepts, however, run the risk of 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1995, p. 127):

The media can spread [...] neologisms more widely and more quickly than either face-to-face communication or elite forms of writing, but the context they provide is insufficient to guarantee an exact transfer of meaning: they do not usually engage in the tedious definition of terms one finds in scholarly journals [...] People may thus arrive at all kinds of inferences about the meaning of a new term they encounter in the media, and as they start to use it in other contexts themselves, it begins to drift away from its earlier (and usually narrower) sense. In the process, specialist terms can lose their precision, acquire connotations they did not have before, and start to overlap with other terms from which they were once distinguished.

Cameron was referring at the time to how a notion like gender was becoming a polite synonym for biological sex, although it had been coined precisely in contrast with sex to denote a social identity. But while the media surely have a part in this process, there is little doubt that scholarly circles too can cause discursive drift. Terms like discourse, ideology, and identity have inspired countless researchers to pursue new scientific horizons, in the process propelling these terms to world-fame. Yet the allure and uptake of these terms have at the same time inflated their meaning, to the point that they are now often

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found elusive if not, as Brubaker and Cooper say about identity, ‘hopelessly [...] ambiguous’ Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 6). That some scholars have already felt it necessary to ‘clarify translanguaging’ (Otheguy et al., 2015) seems to suggest that this concept, too, is enduring discursive drift. This may be less the result of its uptake by laypeople than the outcome of its continuous redefinition and extension by translanguaging specialists themselves in their consecutive publications. To be sure, translanguaging today can refer to all speakers’ innate linguistic instinct, to bilinguals’ spontaneous language use, to everyday cognitive processes, to a bilingual pedagogy, and to a theory of language and education. And because applying translanguaging at school in some of these meanings contravenes this institution’s usually monolingual character, it also names transformative, socially critical processes: ‘as new configurations of language practices and education are generated, old understandings and structures are released, thus transforming not only subjectivities, but also cognitive and social structures’ (García and Wei, 2014, p. 3).

In this paper I argue not only that this profusion of meaning gives reason for concern, but that translanguaging is likely to be less transformative and critical than is often suggested. The main reasons for this are that translanguaging scholars share a number of convictions with the monolingual authorities they criticize, that their transformative claims trade on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted, and that translanguaging, at least in some of its representations, is becoming a dominating rather than a liberating force.

In making this argument, it is not my intention to give the final verdict on translanguaging research. This would be unfair given the diversity of work under this banner, as well as difficult to realise here – the literature on translanguaging already is so expansive that a comprehensive account would leave little room for critical appraisal. I have chosen instead to concentrate on work by widely acclaimed scholars as Ofelia García, Li Wei and their collaborators. One reason for this is that their work on translanguaging is most visible, highly influential, awarded by colleagues, and much-quoted, but at the same time contains a number of assumptions that I fear are harmful to the cause I share with them, that is, advocating that schools recognize linguistic diversity. These assumptions are less prominent in the work of other translanguaging scholars, whom I will largely disregard here for rhetorical purposes, and for reasons of space. A second motive for focusing on this subset of scholars is that problems I discuss are not specific to their approach of translanguaging, but range beyond to much other scholarship that takes a critical stance towards schools’ monolingualism. My comments on a particular strand of research may thus be useful to a broader audience. In what follows I first address how the narrow sense of translanguaging was reconfigured into a terminological house with many rooms. I then situate transformative claims in translanguaging research in an educational and cultural ideology, before explaining why these claims have to be reconsidered and contemplating possible alternatives.

## 2. Extending translanguaging

Translanguaging was first coined in Welsh, as *trawsieithu*, to refer to a pedagogy that encouraged the use of two languages (Welsh and English), mainly to promote the acquisition of Welsh in the idea that this would produce balanced bilinguals (Williams, 1994). The initial impulse for the eventual world-fame of this local concept was provided by its translation into English (Baker, 2001) and its subsequent uptake in the literature on dual language and literacy learning. But the major incentive for its greater recognition was the generalization of its meaning ‘from school to street, from pedagogical practices to everyday cognitive processing, from classroom lessons to all contexts of a bilingual’s life’ (Lewis et al., 2012, p. 647), particularly through Ofelia García’s prolific work, later in collaboration with Li Wei, and through its dissemination in Colin Baker’s seminal publications. Two main inspirations stand out for this extension: socio- and psycholinguistic insights about language, and a political project of transformation.

The sociolinguistic insight is that actual language use and people’s perception of it do not always correspond with the distinct (national) languages we conventionally identify (e.g. ‘French’) and that these labels hide significant variation between different idiolects. Rather than speaking French, sociolinguists suggest that speakers engage, first and foremost, in ‘languageing’, that is, combine sets of linguistic resources that may, or may not, agree with canonically recognized languages, codes or styles, and that these resources are deployed alongside other semiotic resources (see, for example, Blommaert and Backus, 2011; Jørgensen, 2008). ‘Languageing’ has also been used in psycholinguistics and language acquisition research to refer to ‘the dynamic, never ending process of using language to make meaning’ (Swain, 2006) and to the ways in which people make sense, articulate their thoughts, and gain knowledge (Becker, 1988; Li Wei, 2011). These insights have inspired the scholars at issue here to propose ‘translanguaging’, rather than ‘languageing’, as a term for speakers’ natural linguistic instinct or cognitive capacity, and for their observable practices.

Thus García and Li Wei propose that ‘[h]uman beings have a natural translanguaging instinct’ (2014, p. 32). This is ‘an innate capacity to draw on as many different cognitive and semiotic resources as available to them to interpret meaning intentions and to design actions accordingly’ (Li Wei, 2016, p. 541). For Otheguy, García, and Reid, translanguaging refers to the mental or psychological sense [of language which] encompasses the billions of individual linguistic competences of speakers the world over, irrespective of whether we call them monolingual or multilingual (2015, p. 286). In a Chomskyan sense, translanguaging here involves a universal competence, one that includes so-called monolinguals.

Translanguaging equally touches upon the idea of performance, though, excluding monolinguals and retaining the conventional identity of the ‘bilingual’. Thus translanguaging involves ‘the multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds’ (García and Wei, 2014, p. 65); ‘the flexible use of linguistic resources by bilinguals in order to make sense of their world’ (García et al., 2015, p. 200); the ‘fluid language practices of bilinguals’ (García and Lin, 2016, p. 117); and ‘the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of

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