Attending to and Transforming Power Dynamics in Translanguaged Research Relationships and Methodology

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Abstract

In this response to Lee (2022), I posit that translanguaging has prompted a re-evaluation of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics methodology in part because the theory has implicated issues of power dynamics and coloniality into the study of language. For this, if researchers wish to conduct research from translanguaging perspectives, it becomes necessary to recognize and attend to power dynamics in research design and methodology. This piece suggests some guiding questions for addressing power dynamics in one aspect of translanguaging methodology — forming research relationships. It explores how, in our relationships to our fields, we might promote answerability (Patel, 2014) for the roles our fields have played in the linguistic hierarchization that translanguaging resists. Second, it explores how research relationships with participants might be made more equitable through researcher reflexivity.

Keywords: translanguaging methodology, positionality, research relationships, power dynamics

As applied linguistics researchers increasingly take up translanguaging perspectives, many have explored the implications of this theoretical turn for research methodology. Jerry Lee's contribution to this issue considers how conventional research methodologies might be "translanguaged" so that researchers' theoretical assumptions and commitments might be better reflected in their own scholarship and research praxis. Lee's work responds to Ndhlovu's (2018) call for translanguaging researchers to break with positivist research traditions and to bring

methods into closer alignment with the "anti-foundational stance" (p. 3) of translanguaging theory.

Why has translanguaging prompted scholars in Applied Linguistics to re-think research methods in this way? Translanguaging breaks with past theories of language and bilingualism by recognizing that the communication practices of people are fluid and flexible and defy categorization into named language categories (García & Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). For any researcher taking up this theory, it would therefore be inappropriate to ask and seek answers to questions that treat languages as "ordered and enumerable objects" (Ndhlovu, 2018, p. 3) or to trace how speakers "code-switch." Despite this notion, as Lee (2022; and 2018) and Pennycook (2019) have pointed out, some "translanguaging" research still does this.

But continued investigation of code-switching under the umbrella of translanguaging research may be a symptom, not a root cause, of the issues that have prompted scholars (e.g., Lee, 2022, Ndhlovu, 2018, Li Wei, 2018) to re-evaluate translanguaging research methodologies. Translanguaging highlights the socially constructed nature of the language categories that society's dominant institutions and ideologies have traditionally imposed and maintained. In recognizing that the language practices of especially language-minoritized people do not conform to these categories, it elevates people's languaging practices over named languages, explicitly implicating issues of power in the description and study of language. As explored in much anticolonial and anti-racist scholarship, power hierarchies also shape and manifest within knowledge production and research (Holt, 2003; Patel 2015). It follows that if researchers wish to conduct research from translanguaging perspectives, they have a responsibility to recognize and attend to those power dynamics in research design and methodology. Reckoning with this responsibility may be at the root of this recent re-evaluation of research methods.

In this issue, Lee argues, "…if we want to claim to be doing research on translanguaging, we need to be asking the right questions…" (2022, p. 9). He explores how the premises of translanguaging can help researchers interrogate the limitations of conventional instruments, our purposes for research, our driving paradigms, epistemologies, and ontologies, what we count as data, how we collect and analyze that data, and who the research matters for. Another important set of questions we might ask in relation to translanguaging methodology relates to the power dynamics inherent in our research relationships with participants and their communities, fieldwork or collection sites, collaborators, and the larger field. Traditionally, research

relationships position researchers—not marginalized communities or participants as having the authority to set research agendas, ask the questions, and control the collection and representation of data. For too long, researchers in language-related fields were driven by colonial logics, and helped to construct hierarchies among language practices (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 2007) which framed the language and communication practices of those in marginalized social groups (racial, gender, class, geographical, ability and so on) as problems to be "fixed," and privileged the "standard" practices of dominant groups. In elevating the language practices of language-minoritized groups, translanguaging theory might also help researchers address the harm caused by our fields and to work towards forming more equitable relationships with participants. These relationships would value not just the dynamic and fluid ways that communities and research participants use language, but what participants share about how research should be conducted and used to advance their inquiries and interests.

Research approaches in fields ranging from education to anthropology, sociology, and others have reckoned with the power dynamics that can surface in research relationships and have charted courses forward. In education, those include participatory design research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016)—a constellation of approaches including social design experiments (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016), community-based design experiments (Bang et al., 2010), research-practice partnerships (Coburn et al., 2013), decolonizing research methodologies (Patel, 2015), and youth participatory action research (Mirra et al., 2015)—which all in some way seek to "account for critical historicity, power, and relationality" (p. 173) involved in doing research. There are also promising moves among applied linguistics and education researchers to work together—juntos—with educators, communities, families, and young people to leverage translanguaging as a pedagogy (García et al., 2017) to support promote more equitable education for language-minoritzed bilingual populations (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2020; Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020). Implied in the "juntos" stance is the practice of researchers meeting stakeholders where they are, listening and collaborating deeply, and taking into account the interests, values, and language practices of especially those who get marginalized in school contexts (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2020). Could taking up a translanguaging juntos stance towards research relationships help applied linguistics researchers similarly forge more equitable relationships with our fields and participants? Could such a move also promote more sensitive and impactful scholarship?

Since 2015, I have researched within two separate projects that have taken up translanguaging as a north star to study and support U.S. K-12 multilingual educational contexts: the *City of New York-New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals* (CUNY-NYSIEB) and *Participating in Literacies and Computer Science* (PiLa-CS). These projects' teams have grappled with many ethical questions related to navigating the power dynamics inherent all research, but which are particularly foregrounded when conducting research from a translanguaging perspective (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2021; Vogel et al., 2020). In both projects, goals included going beyond what institutional ethics boards required of us to establish equitable, mutually supportive relationships to promote transformation in educational environments.

In response to Lee's provocation, I will review his and others' arguments about how translanguaging methodology implicates re-evaluation of the power dynamics of knowledge production. Then, I will share some questions which have helped me reflect on and promote more equitable power dynamics in terms of how I as a researcher relate to the field, and to the ways my own linguistic and social identities shape my relationships with research participants. Many colleagues across these two projects and beyond, as well as texts and theories from bilingual education, educational research, decolonial and Indigenous studies, and Black and Chicana feminism have helped me begin to answer these questions. I do not claim to be an expert on forging and maintaining these relationships, or to have resolved or transcended the systemic power hierarchies that structure most knowledge production in the academy. It is my hope that these questions will supplement Lee's work and ongoing conversations about translanguaging research methodologies in applied linguistics by highlighting ways to better interrogate and reflect on the power dynamics within our research relationships.

Translanguaging, power, and knowledge production

Translanguaging theory recognizes that all users assemble features from a unified linguistic, semiotic, and social repertoire to make meaning and communicate, which means researchers have a tool to more sensitively and accurately document the complexity, dynamism, and multimodal nature of people's actual language practices. But what distinguishes recognizing people's translanguaging from simply recognizing their "languaging"? Recognizing the "trans" aspect of people's languaging is a political act (Flores, 2014). García and colleagues worked out the theory in the context of describing and elevating the fluid, creative and critical language

practices of emergent bi/multilingual children whom they encountered in New York City public schools (García, 2009). Translanguaging has been mobilized to address and even dismantle the linguistic and social hierarchies that have kept school systems and other institutions from valuing the assets of language-minoritized people (Flores et al., 2012).

One premise in particular has enabled scholars to use translanguaging theory as part of a larger translanguaging approach to research that advances social justice commitments: the idea that language-minoritized, emergent bi/multilingual people orchestrate their language and meaning-making resources in ways that *transcend and defy* society's linguistic and social categories (García, 2009; García & Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). As García et al. (2021) explain it in a recent manifesto, this part of the theory

> …rejects abyssal thinking; it is a way to understand the vast complexity and heterogeneity of language practices, avoiding their conception as problems and their evaluation in the negative terms of the colonial imaginary line that values only those socially situated as being above and making invisible those assigned to being below. (p. 208)

By abyssal thinking, the authors refer to the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007), who theorized that colonial logics have hierarchized peoples and practices into "civilized" and "uncivilized," and have assigned "legitimacy only to the knowledge systems and practices stereotypically associated with dominant white monolingual people" (García et al., 2021, p. 205). Helping scholars and practitioners unleash translanguaging's potential energy to highlight and critique power hierarchies has been the notion of raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Given prevailing racism and colonial logics in our societies, the "white listening subject" position (which may be taken up by individuals, institutions, and so on) perceives deviance in the speech and communication of racialized people, no matter their performance. Translanguaging can be used as a tool to center "the vast linguistic complexity and heterogeneity of people and language … [to] challenge the line itself, rather than simply try to help people live with or overcome it" (García et al., 2021, p. 205).

Recognizing and promoting the dismantling of power hierarchies is in the DNA of translanguaging theory. To live up to the premises of the theory, researchers must consider power dynamics in not just their rhetoric, but in their research process and its products. As Lee argues, in an effort to achieve "a greater understanding of language as it is practiced in social

contexts," translanguaging paradigms are "invested in foregrounding the potential in that which has been and continues to be neglected or dismissed by conventional paradigms" (2022, p. 3)—including those paradigms that guide our research.

Social science and humanities fields have reckoned with the power dynamics implicated in researchers and academics representing "others" for decades, generating a host of alternative approaches and methodologies (Holt, 2003 as cited in Ndhlovu, 2018). Both Lee (2022) and Nhdlovu (2018) cite a rich body of scholarship written from anti-racist, decolonial, and Indigenous perspectives to highlight how logical positivism developed as the dominant research paradigm in social and natural sciences in the West and metropole contexts, and how it has been employed to sustain White supremacy and coloniality. The latest conversations in applied linguistics center around how the research community might use the premises of translanguaging to re-think methodology in response to these problematics. Lee takes up a reformist approach that guides researchers to "avoid mapping preconceived categories of language onto research data" (p. 8) and to ask critical questions as we engage with questions around sampling, instruments, and so on. Lee argues perhaps it is not necessary to "reinvent the wheel" (p. 6) —an argument which might resonate with those who have followed how post-positivist takes on conventional research have built in some measure of flexibility and an acknowledgment that researchers do not seek "absolute truth" but "warranted assertability" (Phillips & Burbules, 2000).

But can one use translanguaging to describe and interpret participants' practices without addressing power? Even avoiding the use of "pre-conceived categories" in research is an exercise in pushing up against linguistic hierarchies—notice the rhetorical gymnastics involved in adding the phrase "what we/society call" before every reference to a named language in Otheguy et al. (2015) to emphasize the socially constructed nature of these categories. Grappling with power is part of the translanguaging researcher's task. The question is how to do so. There are a range of ways that translanguaging researchers have addressed language and other hierarchies through their methodologies. Li Wei's moment analysis (2011) offers a corrective to approaches in applied linguistics research that seek "universal principles," "maxims," and patterns in language use, instead, privileging the critical and creative innovations that emerge from analysis of participants' "language-in-use" and metacommentary from the bottom-up.

Ndhlovu (2018) proposes breaking free of positivist models by proposing an alternative research approach rooted in reflexive auto-ethnographic practice.

Relationships to field, self, participants, sites, lands, and communities are core to research methodology. This is true of more conventional qualitative (Maxwell, 2012) and applied linguistics (Candlin & Sarangi, 2004) paradigms, as well as within more transformative paradigms in applied linguistics (as described in Hashemi, 2020) and beyond. Coloniality and other power hierarchies also shape and manifest within these relationships (Patel, 2015). If we are to take seriously translanguaging's potential to challenge that "colonial imaginary line," then research relationships are one place to focus our energy. In the next part of my response, I'll share some reflections for considering power in the context of navigating relationships with our field and then our participants.

Power, translanguaging, and researcher positionality vis-à-vis relationships with the field

A core relationship that researchers maintain is with our fields of study. These fields were born during the height of European colonialism, which helped sediment power dynamics between researcher/researched, and researcher/field site. Educational researcher Leigh Patel argues that research relationships can reproduce the extraction and deficit narratives of settler colonialism, with researchers mining communities for data they can come to "own" and then use to profit and advance their careers. This is especially the case when researchers from outside of researched communities maintain visions of themselves that include "being a savior, more expert, and more capable," (Patel, 2014, p. 368) rather than as working reflexively "in concert with, as opposed to on, peoples" (p. 369). Patel asks researchers to consider what we and our fields are "answerable to." In the case of education research, she argues the field must answer to its' perpetuation of relationships rooted in extraction and ownership, and to take responsibility for "stewardship of ideas and learning" (p. 372). In applied linguistics, we are also answerable to the role our field has played in inventing the very concept of language, language categorization, and hierarchization which supported oppressive colonial projects (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) and which translanguaging aims to dismantle.

Translanguaging can help us walk down a path towards answerability by denaturalizing what many have come to simply accept about our fields' conventions. Lee argues that translanguaging "asks us to be amenable to what may seem at first glance to be 'unusual' uses of

language" (2022, p. 1). Later, he uses the terms "difference" (p. 2) and (citing Heller, [2007]; and Pennycook, [2012]) "unexpected resourcefulness" to describe the languaging of "those who have been positioned in the sociolinguistic peripheries" (p. 3). He argues that translanguaging can help us "reconsider our orientations to what has been epistemologically valued versus that which has been discarded" (p. 4). To translanguage our relationships to the field, we might take responsibility for the ways our field takes up the white listening ear (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and speak in an active, rather than passive voice about these processes. Who is doing the valuing, discarding, and marginalization? Language use that is "different/unexpected/unusual" to whom? Communities have valued their own translanguaging practices for millennia. Applied linguistics, working in conjunction with state institutions and other power brokers, has undervalued and discarded language practices and peoples.

Given the history of our field, how are we approaching our participants? Is it with a "pathologizing gaze"? (Patel, 2014, p. 366). Eve Tuck, an Unangax̂ scholar in the field of Indigenous studies and educational research, argues for communities and researchers to reject research that "document[s] peoples' pain and brokenness" to instead "hold those in power accountable for their oppression" (2009, p. 209). How might our research methods and relationships begin to help our field redress harm and repair?

Power, translanguaging, and researcher positionality vis-à-vis relationships with participants

To bring research into greater alignment with translanguaging's premises, we can also better understand and address power dynamics within our relationships with participants. We might begin by considering our own positions and social locations which shape how we perceive and are perceived by others. Patel cites the work of Sandy Grande (2004), arguing that there are material consequences for how identities get "essentially ascribed by a settler state" (Patel, 2015, p. 3). How do our individual experiences, identities (including race, gender, class, ethnicity, ability, religion, and so on), our positions (e.g., in the academy, in metropole contexts, in the West), our own experiences with (language) marginalization and oppression, and our family histories shape the opportunities, lenses, and material conditions that make our research possible, and our rationale for conducting research guided by translanguaging? Importantly for applied

linguistics, we must consider our own linguistic repertoires and the relationship of those repertoires to power dynamics in society.

This is not as simple as listing out identity categories. In fact, translanguaging's "anti-foundational" stance can help us challenge the idea that people can be reduced to categories which determine how we conduct research and how that research is received. I grappled with these questions while completing dissertation research within the PiLa-CS project in classrooms serving bi/multilingual children, most of them recent arrivals to New York City from parts of Latin America within the last few years (Vogel, 2020). My father, grandparents, and great-grandparents settled in the United States from parts of North Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Words from what society would call Syrian Arabic, Hebrew, and Yiddish make their way into conversations among my family members, and food and cooking are salient features in our communicative repertoire. Our family also experienced intergenerational language shifts and linguistic assimilation. I studied, worked, and traveled across Latin America and worked as a bilingual Spanish/English teacher. These experiences have helped me make some meaning of student participants' experiences, contexts, and translanguaging practices. At the same time, to avoid misrepresentation and deficit depictions of students, it was necessary for me to identify the differences in our lived experiences and the meaning we ascribe to these events. My and my family's racialization as White, my age, my gender, my position as a former teacher and university-based researcher, my socio-economic class, the time period when my family settled in the United States, my immigration status, the fact that I learned Spanish as enrichment and not due to material need or circumstance, and many other factors shape the ways I see and am seen in fieldwork sites.

Given my positionality, as I came into relationship with students and teachers, collected field notes, transcribed data, and analyzed that data using Li Wei's moment analysis technique, I had to recognize my own tendencies to embody a "white listening ear" (Flores & Rosa, 2015) and attune my ears to the ways that students used language. This looked like recognizing and checking assumptions and findings frequently with students, teachers, texts, and colleagues with more proximity to the communities I was working within. It also looked like engaging in some of the Nhdlovu's self-study techniques; in one recent paper, I analyzed and re-thought my own surprising reaction to students' translanguaging, which involved two Latinx boys ascribing a race, nationality, and gender identity to a computerized voice (see Vogel, 2021). Such self-

reflexive practices can help researchers continue to challenge linguistic hierarchies and to come into greater alignment with translanguaging premises.

In addition to considering how we perceive and are perceived in the field, we might also translanguage methodology by recognizing the power dynamics inherent in how we express and share. As theorist and Black feminist, bell hooks, wrote, we cannot "relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory" (hooks, 1994, p. 90)—especially true when scholars and researchers inhabit traditionally marginalized standpoints and identities. hooks, as well as Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa, have described how they write from multiple locations and standpoints, and recognize the sparks that can result from this synthesis and movement. Employing translanguaging rhetorically, Anzaldúa (2015) writes:

> When I "speak" myself in creative and theoretical writings, I constantly shift positions—which means taking into account ideological remolinos (whirlwinds), cultural dissonance, and the convergence of competing worlds. It means dealing with the fact that I, like most people, inhabit different cultures and, when crossing to other mundos, shift into and out of perspectives corresponding to each; it means living in liminal spaces, in nepantlas. (p. 3)

Anzaldúa's writing provides some clues for those of us who wish to translanguage research methodologies. We all speak from many voices and standpoints, for many purposes, and with or on behalf of many communities. While doing dissertation fieldwork with students, teachers, and parents, I spoke in the voice of my institution, its Institutional Review Board, and our funders. I spoke using what would be recognized as English and Spanish, the language of school, the language students used in the hallways and at recess, and the language of the academy. I spoke as a student, a teacher, a teacher-educator, a computer scientist, a school community member, a confidante, a curious observer, a curriculum co-designer. In an effort to use our translanguaging research to push against educational and linguistic injustice, I also found myself speaking as a Jewish person interested in "tikkun olam" (repairing the world), as a White ally to colleagues and students of color, or as an advocate for bi/multilingualism and educational equity. These voices and standpoints came with different kinds of access and privilege, and there was power in being able to inhabit them and translanguage between and beyond them to produce knowledge. There were also potential pitfalls to avoid regarding exercising power inappropriately by failing to listen, to "speak over" or "speak for" others when not invited to do so. Not all applied linguists

work in field contexts such as this, but these questions are relevant for anyone analyzing language-in-use—that fact brings us into relationships with people and their language practices.

To bring applied linguistics and sociolinguistics methodologies into closer alignment with the premises of translanguaging, it becomes necessary to understand and redress the power dynamics inherent in our research relationships. That process begins by taking clues from other fields, like education, which have begun to reckon with power dynamics in research (e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), and pedagogy-focused projects within our own field (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020; CUNY-NYSIEB, 2020). It means understanding researchers' relationships to fields that have perpetuated harms and considering what answerability might look like when we come into relationship with especially marginalized language users and communities. The process continues when we unpack and consider power dynamics related to our positionality—the factors and experiences that shape how we perceive and express ourselves—in relationship with research participants. Grounded in these commitments, some of the questions that Lee suggests we ask about our methodology in pursuit of "translanguaging" it, become easier to answer.

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