

# Translanguaging: a New Paradigm in Applied Linguistics\*

Yuejun Yang

School of Foreign Languages and Literature  
Yunnan Normal University  
Kunming, People's Republic of China

Qinghua Peng\*\*

School of Foreign Languages and Literature  
Yunnan Normal University  
Kunming, People's Republic of China  
\*\*Corresponding Author

**Abstract**—Since the term of translanguaging was put forward by Welsh educator Cen Williams in the 1990s, it had aroused great interest among scholars and researchers in linguistics and applied linguistics abroad. In the past 20 years, the term has developed into a new influential paradigm which has great effect on the conceptualization of an individual's communicative competence and development in language learning, and on the reflection of new approaches to second or foreign language instruction including bilingual or multilingual education. This paper attempts to elaborate the concept and characteristics of translanguaging and discuss its contributions and implications for the study of applied linguistics and language education.

**Keywords**—*translanguaging; development; characteristics; implications*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Translanguaging, originally referred to a special linguistic practice in bilingual education, has developed into a new paradigm in the field of applied linguistics and multilingual education for the last two decades. In recent years, the paradigm has an overwhelmingly influential effect on the research of language education as it theoretically provides a fresh model for conceptualizing the features of bilinguals or multilinguals' language use and their language competence. On the other hand, it practically offers new approaches to language instruction, including second or foreign language teaching and bilingual or multilingual education. The concept of translanguaging has not only gained a wide recognition in the international academic community, but also attracted great attention of the Chinese scholars. Considering the great impact of the concept upon second or foreign language teaching and bilingual or multilingual education, this paper intends to elaborate the concept and characteristics of translanguaging and discuss its contributions and implications for the study of applied linguistics and language education.

## II. THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLANGUAGING

The term of translanguaging originally derived from a Welsh word *trawsieithu* given by Cen Williams in describing a special linguistic practice in bilingual education in the Welsh language revival movement (Cited from Li, 2018). It meant that, in class, teachers tried to impart knowledge in Welsh, and students responded in English; on the other hand, students read a text in Welsh, and teachers explained it in English. According to Williams, the concept of translanguaging can be considered as speech acts of teachers and students alternatively using two languages for fulfilling their tasks in the classes of reviving the Welsh language. For example, teachers may ask questions in Welsh, and students could answer the questions in English. It is a kind of bilingual education different from those in Canada and southeastern countries where bilingual education actually means that only one language that is learned as the target language and is used in class. That is why Baker (2001, p. 288) translated the word of *trawsieithu* into translanguaging in English, and interpreted translanguaging as "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining and understanding knowledge through the use of two languages."

Garcia (2009a) extended the definition of translanguaging, from its original concept of content teaching with the input and output in two languages to a special linguistic phenomenon in bilingual class. Garcia (2009) further depicted translanguaging as how bilinguals used their linguistic resources to create meaning and achieve the communication. In his opinion, translanguaging is constructed based on the dynamics of bilingualism. There are no two-interdependent-language systems between the two languages that learners have acquired or learnt, but a unified semiotic system that integrates various lexical, morphological, and grammatical features, as well as those individual recurring experiences and repertoires. (García, 2016) People deploy these features in different environments to achieve different communication purposes. Garcia (2009b) emphasized the dynamic characteristics of translanguaging and argued that such linguistic practices in communication are often diverse and constantly shifted to multi-languages and multi-modalities. Based on this recognition, García (2011a) held that the speaker's linguistic system or language competence is composed of the above-mentioned features

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rather than various independent languages, so that the study of translanguaging turns to observing the idiolect of the speaker. Otheguy, Garc ía, and Reid (2015) clearly stated that what the research of translanguaging concerns about is just to analyze the speaker's idiolect. Li (2018) also considered translanguaging as the study of the speaker's linguistic repertoire which is distinctly different from the social-political structured languages, that is, the integrity of the learner's linguistic repertoire rather than his or her knowledge of the specific grammatical system of the named language. In Wang's (2018) view, translanguaging is a process in which the multilingual speaker uses a unique feature from different languages in communication, and such a feature is seen as a unified repertoire rather than the distinguished language systems with social and political marks or characteristics.

Li's (2011a) generalization of the translanguaging study may offer a good understanding of the concept, i.e., "translanguaging is both going between different linguistic structures and systems 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." It creates a social space for multilinguals that brings together different dimensions of personal history, experience, environment, attitudes, beliefs and ideologies, cognition and physical ability, and combines these into a coordinated and meaningful performance, making it into a lived experience. To this understanding, the author believes that translanguaging refers to the process in which the speaker uses all their semiotic resources as a unified communication system, i.e. linguistic repertoire. In the process, they strategically utilize multiple symbolic resources (including verbal and non-verbal) in the system to coordinate complex social and cognitive activities.

### III. CHARACTERISTICS

As is above discussed, translanguaging is the communicative process of "going between" and "going beyond" linguistic structures and systems on a unified system of individual linguistic repertoire. Obviously, the concept of translanguaging has its own unique features. To probe into them will give us an idea of the new trends in applied linguistics and language education. This paper tries to present the three characteristics of the concept although it has more than those are discussed below.

#### A. Trans-systems

The trans-system can be the first feature of the concept *Translanguaging*. The feature was formed along with the emergence of the special language use of translanguaging by language learners switching to use socially constructed languages in bilingual education. In structuralist linguistics, language is a system, so the feature of trans-system initially referred to code switching between two or three different language systems when bilinguals or multilinguals used different languages in communication. Later on, the researchers further interpreted it as the speaker's idiolect —

the linguistic repertoire without the consideration of the socially and politically constructed specific language such as English, French, etc. This characteristic allows us to transcend the concept of language use as different codes that people move between from time to time, shifting our understanding of language from static code switching to dynamic language use, that is, utilizing, integrating and negotiating semiotic resources in the act of meaning-making. In Hawkins' word (2018, p. 57), "repertoires are the accumulation of semiotic resources people have access to and can leverage in communication, always embedded in socio-historical trajectories, expanding from those directly identifiable in face-to-face interaction (such as gesture and dress) to those less tangible (such as cultural-historical scripts, and understandings and beliefs embodied through life trajectories)." Based on this, interpersonal communication actually transcends the labeled language system and structure constructed by the society, and transcends the "(verbal) language-center" communication system, and involves a large number of means of meaning-making in communication, such as images, gestures, texts, etc. Consequently, the research of the trans-system feature of translanguaging is focused on the aspects of linguistic repertoire, multi-modality and assemblage.

#### B. Trans-spaces

The second feature of the concept *Translanguaging* is trans-spaces. It is a common sense that linguistic communication is produced and comprehended in time and space, which implies that language users' linguistic system or repertoire containing spatiality or spatial repertoire. Spatiality or spatial repertoire can be interpreted as an important means of considering all practices as contextualization, integration, networking, mediation, and ecology, thus combining with different conditions, resources, and participants. Pennycook and Otsuji (2015:83) defined the spatial repertoire as: "link[ing] the repertoires formed through individual life trajectories to the particular places in which these linguistic resources are deployed." According to Canagarajah (2017), the spatial repertoire is first regarded as an assemblage of all possible semiotic resources including language; second, it is not brought to the event by the individual, but is assembled in a distributed practice by cooperating with others in the activity; third, the spatial repertoire is embedded in the material ecology and promoted by social networks. Fourth, it is a means to replace the grammar to successfully shape meaning and realize communication. Accordingly, it is considered that the feature of trans-spaces in translanguaging is a spatial repertoire generated in the process of "going between" and "going beyond" linguistic structures and systems. This characteristic also suggests that language users integrate social spaces (language codes) separated through various practices that occur in different locations, and in the integration, they combine their different dimensions of history, experience, environment, attitude, belief, ideology, cognition, and physical ability to form a coordinated and meaningful performance.

The characteristic of trans-spaces, also named translanguaging space, embraces two traits, i.e., creativity and criticality. Creativity is considered as the ability to choose between adhering to and violating rules and norms of communicative behaviors (including the use of language). It is also about pushing and breaking old and new, traditional and original, as well as acceptable and challenging boundaries. Critically refers to the ability to properly, systematically and insightfully use available evidence to provide information for well-thought-out views about cultural, social and linguistic phenomena, to question the received wisdom, and to express opinions through reasonable responses to situations. The two traits have an intrinsic connection: the individual who pushes or breaks the boundary needs to be critical; and the best representation of one's criticality is his or her creativity.

### C. Transformative Nature

The concept of translanguaging has made the transformative contribution to the study of applied linguistics as Li (2018, p. 27) says "the transformative capacity of the Translanguaging process not only for language systems, but also for individuals' cognition and social structures." For language systems, the concept of translanguaging breaks through the traditional view of learning discrete linguistic systems with strict proficiency indicators in language learning, especially L2 or L3 learning. It considers that when learners learn their L2 or L3 languages, they construct their own linguistic repertoire, but not the discrete different language systems. On this recognition, all the socially constructed languages are endowed with the equal status in language education, and the essence of the symbols is restored. On the other hand, it overturns the mode of the language-centered communication, and treats "oral language", i.e., linguistic resources and other symbolic resources fairly in language education, instead of considering one as "primary" and the other as "secondary".

For individuals' cognition and social structures, the first point is about learners' cognitive transformation of language system and competence. In the traditional view, when an individual learns a second or foreign language, his or her language system is regarded as two separate systems of languages such as English, French, Chinese, each system consisting of its own vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and meaning. The concept of translanguaging considers that L2 learners' language system and competence is a dynamic linguistic repertoire. As Garcia (2016) put it, there are no two language systems which can be shuttled between in the minds of bilinguals, but a semiotic system integrating various lexical, morphological and grammatical features, social practices and individual characteristics, and those external features which are becoming part of their bodily memory through using them (e.g., computer technology). In Cummins' (1980) model of common underlying proficiency (CUP), the two languages mastered by the learner are like visible icebergs which are separated at the surface, but the cognitive function of the two languages below the surface is operated by the same central processing system which is termed as CUP. Because of this, the improvement of an

individual's listening, speaking, reading and writing ability in one or two languages indirectly facilitates the enhancement of CUP.

As for the second point of social structures, it discusses how the transformative nature of translanguaging affects and is validated by social structures. The translanguaging study emphasizes *transformative*, which is clearly influenced by Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2003). Critical pedagogy refutes the view that schools cannot change society, because schools cover up their purpose, that is, through the transmission of teaching content and teaching methods, the existing unequal relationship is still produced. That is to say, "the oppressed adopt an attitude of adhesion to the oppressor (Freire, 1970, p.45)." In this way, "the invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders (ibid, p.153)." Critical educators hold opposing opinions. The reasons are as follows: first, curricula and teaching practices are stripped of stereotypes, and, second, that pupil-centered approaches started from dialogue rather than monologue. Inspired by Rousseau's natural education and personal creativity, students look at established facts from critical perspectives and through personal experiences, so that they can become "beings for themselves" rather than "beings for others" (ibid, p.74). The sociological hypothesis behind this view is to make the school a social front-line, a place for resistance and transformation, and constitute the first step in social change (Jaspers, 2018). Therefore, the reform in the field of education, namely translanguaging, can promote the reform of social structures. In turn, social change can be reflected through education.

## IV. IMPLICATIONS

As a new paradigm in the field of applied linguistics, the concept of translanguaging provides new perspectives on the interpretation of language competence and new approaches to the study of language education. For the interpretation of language competence, structuralist linguistics emphasized the conceptual privilege of "one language, one state" (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Under the influence of this ideology, language is regarded as a separate system, each system consisting of its own vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and meaning. So, what a bilingual or multilingual pursues is constantly learning different monolingual systems in the hope of achieving the same language level as native speakers. The concept of translanguaging has changed the idea, considering language competence as a dynamic process, an individual's linguistic repertoire. Different from the traditional view, language competence in translanguaging theory has three properties: First, it is dynamic. Becker (1991) holds that "there is no such thing as Language, only continual languaging, an activity of human beings in the world (p. 34)." He reiterates Ortegaray Gasset's (1957) argument that language should not be regarded "as an accomplished fact, as a thing made and finished, but as in the process of being made (p. 242)." During this process, we use language to negotiate and produce meaning, communicate and shape our knowledge and experience (Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki, & Brooks, 2009).



Second, as a linguistic repertoire, language competence has comprehensiveness. The concept of translanguaging regards a speaker's linguistic repertoire as a semiotic assemblage consisting of various types of semiotic resources beyond the language that can express meaning, and the language that transcends the social-political languages. According to Li Wei (2014, 2018), the theory of translanguaging is what post-multilingualism advocates. Post-multilingualism mainly considers two questions: first, how to deal with the relationship between monolingual code-switching and multilingual code-mixing, and even more complex linguistic repertoire; second, how to understand the translanguaging phenomena and the cognition, social culture and values behind the phenomenon. Thibault (2017) also analyzed language from an ecological psychology perspective, pointing out that language was a collection consisted of various material, biological, symbolic, and cognitive attributes and competence of language users in real time and across multiple time scales.

The third property of language competence in the theory of translanguaging is cognition. This property can be seen in the first and second properties, especially in the three characteristics of translanguaging in Section 3. What is more important, it exposes the same central processing system of the two or three languages that bilinguals or multilinguals use in communication.

For the study of language education, as is discussed in Section 2, the term of translanguaging originally stemmed from bilingual teaching practice in Wales, and its development certainly makes great contributions to applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Apart from the theoretical interpretation of learners' language competence, one of the significant teaching approaches the theory of translanguaging suggests is that code-switching and code-mixing in bilingual teaching may be the effective way for students to achieve their learning content and goal. It is self-evident that the use of L1 and L2, even L3 in language teaching class promotes learners' conceptual and cognitive ability.

The other significant approach the theory of translanguaging offers to applied linguistics and language education is the motivations and the practical use of multimodal teaching. The theory of translanguaging shows that the model of language teaching in class is not only sort of code-mixed one, but also a mixture of all the semiotic resources such as gestures, expressions, and multimedia. All in all, the theory of translanguaging provides the ways and approaches in which learners are proactive in their target language learning.

## V. CONCLUSION

The paper has presented a new paradigm of translanguaging which re-conceptualizes an individual's communicative competence and development in language learning. The paradigm provides not only theoretical frameworks in the study of applied linguistics, but also new approaches to second or foreign language teaching in practice. It is beyond the author's ability to give a full

formulation of such a new theory, so there must be some loopholes in the paper. What the author expects is the discussion in this paper may give people some inspirations and enlightenments to do further study in the enquiry of this area.

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