

D.38 The Performative Possibilities of Language

Performing Our Language Beliefs in the Classroom

Adrienne Jones Daly, University of Rhode Island

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Hi y'all, bonjour, konnichiwa. My name is Adrienne Jones Daly, and I am finishing my Ph.D. at the University of Rhode Island this spring. This presentation, "Performing Our Language Beliefs in the Classroom," stems from my research for my dissertation, entitled *Practicing Translingualism: Instructor Conceptions and Practices*.

Bon. My dissertation study looked at how composition instructors practice translingualism. [slide] For those of y'all who don't know, translingualism is a theoretical approach that highlights, among other things, the fluidity of language boundaries and the ways that people can communicate by mixing and moving among their various languages. My scholarly background is in linguistics, [slide] and I found that translingualism captured the dynamism of language and offered a lot of potential for helping composition to reflect the linguistic diversity of our students. As I read through the scholarship and tried to apply the ideas to my own teaching, I found myself wondering how *instructors'* language practices were a part of teaching with a translingual approach.

Avant de continuer and telling you a bit about my research, I'd like for you to reflect on your experience with language. Throughout this presentation, I will pose some questions to help you think about what you have experienced, what you believe, and what you can do with language. For this first reflection, I have two questions: [15-30-second pause]:

- What languages, language varieties, or dialects do you have as part of your language history?
- What experiences do you have, if any, of language difference (not knowing the language of the place or being told that your language is different or wrong)?

Translingualism is often associated with code-meshing [slide], which is combining two or more languages into the same text, with an obvious example being the CFP for this conference. So, let me ask you a couple more questions [30-second pause]:

- Have you ever code-meshed in your writing or in your speech?

- In what contexts?

For my study, I wanted to see if translingual instructors were code-meshing in the classroom. I interviewed seven different instructors who taught with a translingual approach. All of my participants had experience using other languages, with a couple of them using a language other than English on a regular basis in their personal lives. Even more importantly, they all had experiences of language difference, usually linked to immigration or travel.

However, except for one participant, they did not use these other languages in the classroom. English was the dominant language in all the cases. Perhaps this should not have been so surprising. Juan Guerra (2016) [slide] notes how he realized that while his students were clearly using language in dynamic ways, they were not bringing it into the classroom because it was not rhetorically appropriate.

The mistake I made—which is the same one so many proponents of code-meshing seem to make as well—is that I inadvertently assumed that students can ignore the circumstances they face in the new rhetorical situation (an assigned essay in a classroom) and can easily transfer their language practices from one site to another. In other words, I failed to acknowledge that I was asking students to do the same thing with language in two rhetorically different and highly situated settings. (Guerra, 2016, p. 231)

I realized that *moi aussi* had assumed that if instructors were multilingual, they would bring their languages in the classroom. For all of my participants, English was the dominant language of the classroom because it was it was the *shared language*, une langue partagée. Some participants taught in English monolingual contexts; others had incredibly diverse student groups for whom English was the lingua franca. Even for my one participant who shared Spanish with many of her students, English predominated in her classroom for several reasons, including the pressures of the institutional context and the generational trauma connected with Spanish in the area. Even more tellingly, none of my participants described themselves as creating written code-meshed classroom texts, whether assignment sheets, syllabi, or the like.

You might be asking why the use of other languages is so important in the classroom. *D'accord*. Let me turn those questions back to you all:

- Do you think students should be able to use their other languages in the composition classroom? Why? Why not?

- Do you think it is valuable to be able to speak a language or language variety other than a Standard English in the classroom with students who share that language? Why or why not?

Christine Tardy (2011) links language beliefs to language practices. If you think that only a particular type of English should be used in the classroom (what we generally call a *Standard¹), then that is how you will practice language and that is what you will expect from students. If you think that other languages are valuable but that good writing is done in *Standard English, then you might invite students to use other languages in the classroom, but you might then require them to write in *Standard English. Guerra (2016) calls these approaches monolingual and multilingual, respectively. Both approaches try to separate languages into specific contexts and uses.

However, a translingual approach believes that an individual's languages cannot be so easily separated. To paraphrase one of my participants, our various languages are always stepping on each other. Instead of trying to hide this reality by insisting on certain grammatical forms, we should instead let our languages be visible and learn to deploy them strategically. With this belief, then, we can appreciate that code-meshing should be part of the translingual teaching approach. Furthermore, we would expect to see more code-meshing in instructors' language practices in the classroom – if that were the goal, right?

Yet, that was not really the case. And here are several reasons why, and what we can take from them:

1. We are focused too much on the product of code-meshing and less on the process of translanguaging more broadly. As Paul Kei Matsuda (2014) has pointed out, and as my participants demonstrated, our full language repertoire² can be used not just in the type of language we produce but how we get to that text or spoken utterance.

Instead of *code-meshing*, I prefer to use the term *translanguaging* to frame the language practices through a translingual approach. I use the term translanguaging, which has been

¹ Translingualism challenges the idea of a standard language with fixed and clear boundaries. What we consider to be Standard English is actually one variety of English that has different norms depending on who you talk to or where you live in the world. Even more importantly, what we consider to be Standard English is often based off of the variet(ies) of English spoken by a particular group: middle- to upper-class Whites. Like Watson & Shapiro (2018), I use the asterisk to draw attention to the variability of a standard.

² Language repertoire refers to the set of languages and language practices that a person can access and use.

used in linguistics, second-language studies, and bilingual education to describe how a person works across their full language repertoire rather than keeping their languages separate. And here's the cool thing: we all translanguage.

Once we understand that to translanguage is to make use of one's repertoire without undue consideration of outside boundaries and constraints, we realize something surprising, namely that translinguaging is what is done all the time also by ... monolinguals! (Otheguy in García and Kleyn, 2016)

Translinguaging, with its emphasis on process as well as product helps us to see that there are more possibilities to use our languages than just overtly code-meshing. It also helps us to see that even when translinguaging, we can end up producing what is conceivably a standardized form of language because we have decided it is rhetorically appropriate. So, let me return to you.

- How do you tend to move between your various registers, dialects, or languages?
- In what ways could you draw on your fuller language history for writing, research, or speaking?

Here are some of the ways that my participants demonstrated translinguaging in the classroom:

- using other languages in conferences, before or after class, or in written communications
- bringing in materials in their other languages for analysis or comparison
- comparing patterns and structures of Academic English to other Englishes or languages
- multimodal and multi-semiotic practices to negotiate meaning and language with students
- language play for both learning language and for making visible the slipperiness of language

2. Even more interesting was that my study participants were using their language histories³ in more subtle ways to practice a translingual orientation to their students'

³ I use the term "language history" because "history" evokes the accumulation of language experiences that shape how we interact and use language. Language histories involve all the languages, language varieties, and social languages that we have learned (repertoire) but also the experiences of using those languages, whether positive or negative, successful or unsuccessful.

language practices and to create a translingual classroom. Here are several ways that they drew on their language histories:

- rhetorical attunement > paying attention to students and making language work visible
- focusing on communication rather than form
- telling stories > making space

Rhetorical attunement refers to an awareness and attention to difference and multiplicity in language and writing. If you haven't already read Rebecca Lorimer Leonard's (2014) article on rhetorical attunement, then you should, especially since it will give you more details and examples than I can describe here. Instructors' language histories have helped them hone their own rhetorical attunement which helped them pay attention to how students were working with language. They could then use these moments in class to make visible the ways that language was being used in dynamic and multiple ways.

Based on their language histories, instructors knew that communication can happen across differences in language and culture when people focus less on the form, particularly grammatical form, and focus on negotiating the meaning through the fuller context. Translingualism acknowledges the ways rhetorical exigence shapes the ways we speak and write, but it pushes us to reconsider what actually counts as rhetorically appropriate and what is rhetorically successful.

Telling stories was a very important way that instructors brought in their language histories. They often told stories about themselves making mistakes, learning languages, or misunderstanding others based on language or cultural differences. These stories were important for challenging the ethos of the teacher as an expert language user, and they made space in the classroom for students to feel comfortable exploring and taking risks with their own language practices.

One thing that I want to stress is that instructors did not perform their language practices as much as they performed their language beliefs. The focus is not on what language instructors can do with language; instead, instructors used their language histories in various ways to help students. Although instructor code-meshing can play a vital role in connecting with students and representing other languages in the classroom, instructors can draw on their language histories in other ways to make visible the ways that languages and dialects other than Standard English make meaning and to make space for students to learn how to draw from their own language histories.

So, I end by shifting the gaze back to you and to your classrooms:

- In what ways can you use your language history to help students feel like their language backgrounds are valued, to see diversity in writing, and to feel comfortable making mistakes and being creative with their writing?
- Are there ways that we can reconsider what counts as rhetorically successful writing?

Merci pour votre attention, and please feel free me contacter if you have further questions. My e-mail is adriennejdaly@gmail.com, and you can also find me on LinkedIn.