et me begin with two questions I would like to address in my contribution to this symposium:

1. When we as teachers take a translingual approach to difference, are we expecting students to produce a particular kind of writing that mimics what we call code-meshing, or do we want students to develop a rhetorical sensibility that reflects a critical awareness of language as a contingent and emergent, rather than a standardized and static, practice?

2. To what extent, if any, should we engage our students in explicit conversations about translingualism in the context of other approaches to language difference, and what consequences are likely to emerge from such conversations?

The answer to the first question, I think, reflects a concept of translingualism as something more than an empty performance meant to fulfill a particular set of teacherly expectations about how we use language. It is a concept that reflects the belief that every student needs to develop a critical awareness about what language does, rather than what it is, in the context of very specific circumstances informed—as the second question suggests—by a critical awareness of the choices made in the context of the various competing ideological approaches to language difference currently available to us. Let me use a recent experience in the classroom to frame the concerns I raise here.

Four years ago in an advanced undergraduate class I taught titled “Language Variation and Language Policy in North America” at the University of Washington,
I had the thirty-four students in the class read Bruce Horner et al.’s opinion piece “Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach” the week before class began so that we could use it as a lens through which we would read and discuss a series of journal articles and book chapters on language variation and language policy. On the basis of the Horner et al. essay, along with ideas from other scholars like Alex Kostogriz who have written about transcultural literacy, I had students in class consider three competing ideological approaches to language and cultural difference that together form what Pierre Bourdieu calls a battlefield, that is, “an arena of struggle through which agents and institutions seek to preserve or overturn the existing distribution of capital” (Wacquant 268).

To make these approaches more readily accessible, I framed them as a continuum with a monolingual/monocultural approach at one end, a multilingual/multicultural approach in the middle, and a translingual/transcultural approach at the other end. Because I do not have the space or time here to describe these perspectives in detail, I hope it suffices to say that each of them represents a set of ideological beliefs, values, and practices that attempts to influence how we/students construct our/their notions of language and culture and deploy them in academic writing and beyond. I will add that I decided to present these approaches to my students explicitly to make sure I familiarized them with the ideological terrain that impinges on the choices speakers and writers need to make as they navigate and negotiate the competing ideologies that continuously hail them. In an effort to address the challenges our students encounter as readers, writers, and rhetoricians when they face these circumstances, I am going to look at the writing and reported perceptions of one of the students from my class in the course of addressing the two questions I asked at the outset. I should note that writing for the class consisted of two short self-reflective essays about students’ own language use, a midterm essay where I asked them to critique the position Horner et al. take in their opinion piece, and a final research essay on a topic of their choice. Here I will only discuss the writing this student did in the self-reflective and midterm essays.

In her first self-reflective essay, Mina Nokeo (a pseudonym) wrote the following:

It’s Sunday morning and my family is getting ready for church. There’s only one bathroom in the house so a few of us are waiting just outside the door for my dad to finish shaving. “Why are we all having what the audience?” he calls out. Another day he’s getting ready to go down to DuPont [a small town 10 miles away] to visit my uncle and [my dad] says to me, “I was wondering if you want to go see if Dennis has a baby, see baby’s Dennis, Dennis’s baby!!” Yet another day he is working on our car with one of my brothers and they’re having trouble getting some of the nuts out. Finally, when they start to come loose, he exclaims, “Now we’re speaking!” I’ve grown up hearing all sorts of things from my dad’s mouth that don’t quite sound right, and I’ve spent quite a few conversations translating his English to “standard English” for people who don’t quite get what he’s trying to say.
After informing readers that her father grew up in Laos when it was a French colony and where he learned Lao at home and French in school, then studied Chinese at a French University, and finally came to the United States and learned English, Mina describes in an interview with me how she and her brother became intrigued by their father’s language use and started “to kind of like, not make fun of him, but kind of point them out. And then we would start to say them, just to be funny. And then they kind of worked their way into our own vocabulary, and then we just built new ones off of that.” The description in her second self-reflective essay of the language she and her brother eventually co-constructed unquestionably exemplifies what much of the literature in the field has described as code-meshing:

My brother and I have created a sort of hybrid-English in which we incorporate words from French, Lao and/or Thai, Hebrew, Russian, Spanish, and Arabic. We also hum some words or phrases that we often say with a particular timing and pitch so the humming mirrors our speech. Our mom thinks it’s amazing that we can talk to each other without actually talking, and our other two brothers have started to pick up on it a little, but they’re not quite as practiced as we are.

Although Mina concludes her second self-reflective essay with these words—“Thinking about all of this makes me really proud of my versatility with language”—a critical observation she makes in the middle of the first self-reflective essay succinctly, and problematically I think, describes her attitude toward this particular aspect of what she and her brother do with language:

The way that I speak around my family is my favorite way of speaking. I don’t have to think through what I want to say before I say it to make sure it’s free of “errors” or “sounds smart.” I can just say what’s in my head and if I can’t think of a word I make one up or use a sound effect or gesture in its place. But there is only a very little bit of how I speak with my family in how I speak with other people who I’m close with; I think this is because the way I speak with my family would make me sound unintelligent or silly to others.

And here, I think, is where we find a contradiction inherent in what Mina sees between the hybrid language she and her brother perform and how she thinks it’s likely to be viewed by anyone not proficient in these language practices, by anyone, that is, who is likely to assess her language performance on the basis of a set of standardized expectations (see Dryer). To establish a sharper distinction between how she sees language operating at home and in the academy, let me add another comment here that Mina makes in her midterm essay, where she ends up negatively critiquing the language practices she deploys at home in the process of critiquing translingualism:

The idea behind the translingual approach is quite good: take a giant step toward social equality among all forms of English by removing SAE [Standard American
English] from its place of superiority in the world of academic writing. It promotes the academic success of students who use a stigmatized dialect by not overwhelming them with a lot of rules and standards that society at large is continually telling them they’ll never master. . . . The problem I have with this approach is that it’s too open-ended. When there are no rules governing language use then there’s nothing to say whether something is or is not English, and there’s no way for an evaluator to provide correction since “correct” is always relative.

Contrary to her declaration here, her earlier observation that her two younger brothers were not able to participate in the discursive practices she and her older brother have developed because “they’re not quite as practiced as we are” belies her argument that what she describes here as translingualism is not rule governed. Clearly, her brothers were not able to participate in their conversations because they had not yet “mastered the rules” that inform their hybrid language.

What Mina describes as her purposeful, code-meshing performances at home most likely shifted dramatically into what we would readily recognize as “SAE Only” forms of academic discourse in her midterm and final essays, because she is not yet as practiced in the latter; or to paraphrase the words Rebecca Lorimer Leonard uses in describing the facility that the six multilingual writers in her study display across a range of language contexts, she is not yet as rhetorically attuned to academic discourse as she is to the home language practices she described earlier. Consequently, despite the fact that I had encouraged my students to perform and produce language in the midterm and final essays in much the same way they had done in the self-reflective ones, Mina and her classmates balked, not because they are incapable of calling on their rich repertoires of multilingual practices, but because the school context lacked the social, personal, and inter-relational stakes—as well as the intimate, rhetorical familiarity—that they readily found at home with their friends and families. 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. As Lorimer Leonard pointedly reminds us, researchers (and teachers) often inadvertently focus “on writers’ knowledge rather than their rhetorical activities—what their literate resources are rather than how they are used” (231).

In response to my first question, then, I want to suggest that we falter in our efforts to help our students understand what a translingual approach is because we have been leading them to think that we expect them to produce a particular kind of writing that mimics what we call code-meshing rather than getting them to understand that what we want instead is for them to call on the rhetorical sensibilities
many of them already possess but put aside because of what they see as a jarring shift in context. This is how Lu and Horner put it in a recent essay where they argued for encouraging a change in orientation rather than the simple privileging of what we have come to call code-meshing:

[R]ather than putting students in the unenviable position of seeming to have to choose between being either submissive victims to demands of the dominant for conformity or tragic heroes resisting those demands against all odds, and at personal academic and economic risk; and rather than treating language difference as a characteristic distinguishing some students as deviations from the norm, teachers can pose more productive and, we argue, valid questions to students about what kind of difference to attempt to make through their work with and on conventions in their writing, how, and why: questions that should resonate with students’ own sense of writing, and with the choices all writers face. (596–97)

In response to my second question, I want to suggest that it is increasingly problematic to limit only to scholarly conversations the debate about whether or not a translingual approach is a viable orientation to use in the classroom. In light of emerging critiques of translingualism (see Matsuda), it is time, I think, for us to engage in the process of explicitly demystifying the various approaches to language difference—including the translingual—by inviting our students to consider how each of them influences the choices they make in the writing classroom. Along these lines, Jennifer Zinchuk, a graduate student in our writing program at the University of Washington, has students in her first-year multilingual writing courses read the Horner et al. opinion piece and write the authors a letter in which they “summarize their key takeaway points and respond with personal examples from lived experience” (personal communication). In keeping with what Zinchuk does, as well as what I described myself doing in my earlier example, we need to expand the conversation beyond the insular conversations of scholarly debate and introduce more of our students in first-year and advanced writing courses to the competing ideologies that inform their current writing and future teaching as well (see Canagarajah). Maybe, as a consequence, our students will have a better chance of developing—as many of them are already in the process of doing—“a full quiver” of the rhetorical and semiotic resources they need to have at their disposal to address what Cynthia Selfe calls the “wickedly complex communicative tasks” we all face in an increasingly “challenging and difficult world” (645).

Works Cited


