Translingualism ≠ code-meshing: A response to Gevers' "Translingualism revisited"

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As scholars who are devoted to a translingual approach and who were educated in L2 writing, we read Jeroen Gevers' essay in the June issue of *JSLW* with great interest. Through reading Gevers' article, and in other cross-disciplinary discussions about the divide between L2 and translingual writing, we have noticed more productive connections than differences. We see an opportunity to create a true dialogue between these two scholarly camps, which have been, as Gevers' review of the literature aptly demonstrates, often at odds over questions of disciplinary territory, theoretical development, and practical pedagogical applicability (e.g., Atkinson et al, 2015; Matsuda, 2014). Like these scholars, we find that the framing of translingualism as a trendier or more progressive alternative to multilingualism, or worse to L2 writing, is deeply problematic (Lee, 2017), as it can permit some of those interested in translingualism to not engage with decades of important work in applied linguistics (Tardy, 2017), obscuring the ways in which translingualism and L2 writing can be complementary.

We find much to agree with in Gevers' piece, but we will focus primarily on what is for us the most important critique which Gevers raises: the concern that translingualism's rapid rise in popularity (as evidenced, for example, by the increasing use of the term in venues such as CCCC presentations) has resulted in the "uncritical adoption" (p.74) of a translingual approach to pedagogy in US composition classrooms. In particular, Gevers follows scholars such as Matsuda (2013, 2014) in warning against a version of translingual pedagogy which is overly focused on *visible* linguistic difference, because "valuing difference for its own sake" can in fact "obscure processes of cultural and linguistic negotiation" (p.74). Gevers acknowledges that "some of translingualism's main proponents have prioritized critical awareness building rather than 'instructed code-meshing'" (p.76) and that reading code-meshed texts can usefully "engage students in more general discussions of translingual practices" (p.78). However, and of importance to our response, in the majority of his article, he argues for caution in adopting translingual pedagogy primarily by raising arguments against the pedagogical use of code-meshing.

For us, defining translingual pedagogy narrowly as one specific type of languaging—code-meshing, or, more specifically, the use of nonstandard spoken dialects in writing—is what creates the false perception of a translingual approach as one which uncritically valorizes language difference. Instead, we see translingual pedagogy as much broader – as any pedagogy which works against the "pathologization of different Englishes that do not meet a narrowly defined set of standards dictated by...a privileged few" (Lee, 2017, p.2). To accomplish this, teachers must to "go beyond simply inviting, encouraging...or curricularizing 'difference'" (Lee, 2017, p.2). In other words, pedagogy is translingual not merely by exposing students to language diversity or by permitting students to use their full linguistic repertoires in their writing, but by asking students to investigate/consider how language standards emerge, how and by whom they are enforced, and to whose benefit, by bringing to light in the classroom how language standards sustain and are sustained by social inequity.

To further the dialogue between L2 writing and translingual scholars, we believe the goals of translingualism, as well as some concepts surrounding code-meshing, need to be clarified. In

what follows, we aim to clarify the relationship between code-meshing and translingual pedagogy, emphasizing ways to move toward a more fully articulated translingual pedagogy.

Translingual pedagogy and the (rhetorical and democratizing) role of code-meshing

Gevers usefully reminds us that valorization of visibly code-meshed products carries the potential for both harmful exoticization—what Matsuda (2014) called "linguistic tourism" (p.483)—and the perpetuation of a myth of happy hybridity, in which language standards are always up for negotiation, warning against an "uncritical celebration of difference" (p.78). He goes on to argue that "the blending of linguistic resources" might not "be appropriate, effective, and empowering for students," advising that "scholars and educators should carefully consider whether multilingual students are in a position to and wish to actively negotiate translingual identities as writers" (p.78).

We see in this criticism an important point of connection, rather than conflict, between L2 writing and translingual scholarship. That is, translingual scholars have also expressed deep concerns about a preoccupation with "conspicuously hybrid language practices", which can reduce translingualism to "a 'consumable collage' of linguistic plurality" (Lee, 2017, p.10; see also Guerra, 2016) and obscure how written products in standard English can result from a translingual writing process (You, 2016). In fact, too much focus on visible code-meshing can actually reinforce monolingualism, by drawing attention to combinations of fixed "languages" rather than subtler variation, boundary pushing, or the fuzzy, complex histories in which words themselves cross borders and are repurposed (e.g., Higgins, 2009). In a translingual pedagogy, code-meshing, like all writing strategies, is a rhetorical choice, a strategy that should be purposeful and carefully executed. If the inclusion of a nonstandard form or any other alternative linguistic resource isn't effective or appropriate, then teachers adopting a translingual approach will address the issue in the same way that Gevers describes (pp. 79-80), considering together with students issues of grammatical clarity, unintentional errors, and academic conventions. The goal is to help students build (meta)linguistic awareness and work towards social justice; a translingual approach does not imply a linguistic or rhetorical free-for-all.

It is true, as Lee (2016) suggests, that assessment in translingual classrooms should be "continuously individualiz[ed] and should work "beyond a homogeneous set of standards" (p. 186). Yet not holding all students to one fixed standard does not mean that students should ignore readers' responses to their work. A translingual approach can acknowledge that language boundaries and standards are socially constructed and permeable without overlooking communicative expectations and without denying the power that adhering to standards can afford in students' lives. In fact, in examining how language standards privilege some speakers or writers' practices over others, we draw attention to this power. As scholars such as Canagarajah (2013a) and You (2016) have suggested, we can and should teach the standard even as we critique it.

We would clarify, though, that characterizing code-meshing as merely infusing spoken resources into writing, or as fusing together standard and nonstandard varieties (as Gevers implies in the abstract and on p. 78) does not fully capture the practice. The term code-meshing has been expanded to include the use of multiple standard written varieties (i.e., Canagarajah, 2013b),

such as Standard English and Standard Spanish, neither of which are considered "spoken varieties". We must also clarify that the larger purpose of code-meshing is to honor, include, and strengthen the range of language and rhetorical resources students already possess, and to honor students' wishes to combat expectations about communicative standards. Young, Martinez, and Naviaux (2011) suggest code-meshing is "a way to promote the linguistic democracy of English and to increase the acquisition and egalitarian, effective use of English in school, in government, in public, and at home" (p. xx). Gevers addresses this purpose of code-meshing when he invokes Canagarajah (2013b) to explain that the "use of vernacular elements in the academic realm should be considered a strategy of resistance" (p. 75).

Perhaps this is why Matsuda (2013) would prefer the term "code-switching with attitude" over "code-meshing" (p.134). As Gevers reminds us, the term code-meshing has been criticized by Matsuda (2013, 2014) for more or less describing the same linguistic practice long defined by linguists as code-switching, marking it as redundant. However, we understand Young's coining of code-meshing as offering an important critique on the ways code-switching has been taken up in popular and educational contexts. The ambiguity of the term "switching" has led uninformed teachers, for instance, to perpetuate what Young calls "code-switching ideology." Under this ideology, Young (2013) clarifies, students

> are asked to switch from their English to the standard. They are patronized, summarily told that their language shares equal prestige with standard dialect, even as teachers belie this very claim by labeling standard language as "formal" and the students' Englishes as "informal," thus reinforcing the superior/inferior linguistic dichotomy. (p.142)

Thus, the coining of the term was not in response to an insufficient uptake by linguists or a misunderstanding by linguistically informed laymen; code-meshing, instead, was meant to counter a problematic but common interpretation of the term, particularly in educational settings and particularly targeting speakers of African American Vernacular English who for decades have been told to leave their language at the classroom door. Thus, "code-switching with attitude" would only describe the linguistic practice of students, which is only one small part of the bigger problem with which Young takes issue: the application of code-switching as justification for teachers to demand students use only Standardized English in the classroom.

These sorts of classroom and societal practices of linguistic injustice are precisely why translingual pedagogy demands—or at least, should demand—that we do more than simply accept or even highlight visible language difference. Translingual pedagogy demands that we work more broadly to break down ideologies that perpetuate harmfully narrow language attitudes and standards (Guerra, 2016). In a translingual approach to writing, then, it is not offering students the chance to code-mesh which is most important – especially because, as Gevers correctly notes (p.75), while some students will find it empowering, others will not. Rather, translingual pedagogy looks above and beyond individual students' practices to larger systems of discrimination and oppression, to the social inequities which monolingualist ideologies support and perpetuate (e.g., Lu & Horner, 2013).[1] While teachers who adopt a translingual approach will be more open to code-meshing in student writing because they have oriented to language

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[1] This goal is far from unique to translingual approaches; scholars and educators in English language education generally and L2 writing particularly have pushed to abandon deficit models of reading linguistic difference, calling out native-speakerism in hiring and publication practices and fighting for more just assessment and placement practices (a few recent examples: Hartse & Kubota, 2014; Ruecker & Ives, 2015; Saenkhum, 2016).

standards as socially constructed, fluid, and, at times, limiting and oppressive to students, that openness does not entail a failure to recognize the social power that mastery over standardized forms bestows, nor does it demand that students (or anyone) code-mesh in any given context. Simply, then, a translingual approach does not (should not) invite linguistic difference just for the sake of it; a translingual approach does not (should not) enforce nonstandard writing in places where it is not appropriate or effective (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013a, 2013b; Lee, 2017); and a translingual approach does not (should not) prioritize above all else visible manifestations of language difference.

The choice to code-mesh is a matter of agency

As part of his critique of translingualism by way of critiquing code-meshing, Gevers correctly points out that "students might find it awkward or inappropriate to represent orality-based discourse in writing" (p.79) and that they may well choose to prioritize meeting readers' expectations over projecting a particular identity in (or pushing against standards through) their writing. With that, Gevers offers us an important reminder to honor students' wishes about their language development, learning, and writing goals. Within a translingual approach, the choice to push the boundaries of communicative norms, or not, is students' to make (Horner & Lu, 2013), and we should still be educators, helping students master grammatical and genre conventions even as we critique them (Canagarajah, 2013a, 2013b; You, 2016). What translingualism asks is that we work with students to investigate where the sense of "awkward or inappropriate" comes from: what hierarchies of privilege are at work in our constructions of readers' expectations, and what the political and social consequences of infusing spoken and written registers might be.

A translingual approach further demands that we as teachers are mindful of how we measure rhetorical appropriateness in the first place. Our "gut feeling" or "informed opinion" that a student's use of code-meshing is not rhetorically effective, for instance, begs the questions of whether we are the ideal judges of rhetorical effectiveness (given the student's purpose and intended audiences) and whether we are inadvertently perpetuating status quo language uses by telling our students their code-meshing just isn't rhetorically effective or appropriate. We must continuously check our own affinities for standard languages and for typified approaches to communicative acts, examining and expanding what we deem acceptable and appropriate in academic and other contexts (Lu & Horner, 2011). We must recall that the typification of academic language and genres cannot be interpreted as natural, innocent, raceless, democratic, or apolitical (Davila, 2016). The development of communicative norms, especially in academia, has historically upheld White, privileged groups (e.g., Lippi-Green, 2012; Shuck, 2006; Wiley & Lukes, 1996) and worked to exclude others who couldn't or wouldn't acculturate. In the classroom, we must do more than acknowledge with students the differences between speech and written communication; we must also examine why those distinctions have historically emerged so that students more fully understand the ideological, political, and inherently racist systems in which they have long been uncritically taught to participate.

We also can consider what it means to offer—or withhold—"choice" from students who don't yet understand the social and racial hierarchies that inform language standards. What of students who have never before been invited to *not* follow conventions? What of students who don't *want* to become academic writers so much as they want to get through academic hurdles, or who

begrudgingly adopt standardized English at the expense of their other languages only so that they may avoid discrimination? What justice do we serve by insisting that students *not* purposefully and thoughtfully push boundaries with language or when we penalize them when they do?

We agree wholeheartedly with Gevers that offering students the opportunity to infuse different dialects, languages, and registers into their writing must be done in mindful, informed, and critically conscious ways. However, we who choose to adopt a translingual approach to teaching writing must never overlook the importance of inviting students who are determined to purposefully infuse language differences, including their oral repertoires, to do so in their academic writing and other spaces.

Improving translingual approaches to teaching writing

If Gevers' view of uncritical uptakes of translingualism rests in practitioners incorrectly assuming that translingualism simply means code-meshing, then it seems the real issue with practitioners lies in their misunderstanding, not their being uncritical. Thus, Gevers' claim that "the implementation of a writing pedagogy that is expressly translingual in orientation poses considerable problems" (p. 81) is only true if applied to incomplete and uncritical adoptions of translingualism. When it comes to teaching language and writing, what ought to be the more pressing concern is when teachers and students uncritically assume that standardized English is natural, neutral, fixed, and equally accessible and empowering to all. Our goal, then, should be to provide support, guidance, and, as Gevers rightly suggests, more research from which practitioners may benefit. We agree that translingual pedagogy isn't yet fully articulated, especially when it comes to assessment of students' writing (however, see Lee 2016, 2017 and Inoue, 2017, for work in this direction). We fully support Gevers' call (p.76) both for more detailed examples of translingual pedagogy, and, crucially, for more empirical investigation of those examples. These goals are all the more important considering that, when faced with critically examining their own translanguaging habits, learners of English can envision translingual futures for themselves (Anderson, 2018). We support calls for more inquiry into SLW and related fields (e.g. Tardy, 2017) that will enable richer pedagogies, including and especially, as Gevers points out, research on error treatment, teacher feedback, intercultural rhetoric, and critical contrastive rhetoric (p. 81).

Yet while this important empirical work accumulates, we hope that teachers will continue to experiment with translingual pedagogy, and will continue to talk about and publish their experiences employing it without fear of being labeled as uninformed and uncritical. Gevers emphasizes throughout his essay that the benefits of translingual pedagogy for multilingual students are as yet unproven, noting also that "writing teachers may not always have access to the knowledge or support required to discuss translingual practices in ways that are helpful to multilingual students" and that "the proposed translingual practices require structural changes at the institutional level" (p.81). Likewise, translingual scholars have noted that school systems, driven by a need to regulate language use, are (perhaps fundamentally) resistant to translingual approaches (Garcia, cited in Anderson, 2018). Recognizing this as we must, however, does not mean we should avoid translingual pedagogies, awaiting the kinds of large-scale and top-down changes that will take lifetimes to fully unfold. Flawed applications of translingual pedagogy, as with any pedagogical innovation, may be seen as an inevitable part of the work of educators puzzling through newly uncovered concepts, problems, and possibilities.

The challenge we all face is to deconstruct and revise our practices in ways that avoid the perpetuation of the monolingualist paradigm. Recognizing what translingual approaches to pedagogy have to offer, beyond code-meshing, is the real promise worth revisiting.

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