Multilingual and Multimodal Interactions

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The papers in this special issue contribute significantly to the discussion about translanguaging and pursue the critical discussion of multilingual practices while building on earlier work in urban sociolinguistics (Rampton 1995; Jørgensen 2008, inter alia), globalization (Blommaert 2010, inter alia), and on the research about language teaching and the multilingual subject (Kramsch 2009). The concept translanguaging glosses a contemporary linguistic reality, shaped by migration, mobility, and media in the conurbations of the 20th and 21st century and increasingly spreading out to the rest of the societies.

Re-conceptualizing multilingual practices as translanguaging is a radical update of the theoretical and methodological tradition of multilingualism, code-switching, etc. The endeavor is ambitious and points toward a new research paradigm or at least a ‘transdisciplinary research perspective’ (Li, 2017). While I sympathize with the attempts to formulate such a paradigm, I will argue that it should not be formulated in linguistic terms. The papers do not fully agree and lean either toward a linguistic position (‘I am primarily concerned with language practices’ Li Wei, ‘available codes’, Canagarajah (2017)) or a position according to which ‘language is integrally intertwined with other ‘things’ to mediate meaning making’ (Hawkins, this issue), and to space and time (Canagarajah, 2017).

My response will touch on two concepts that have formed the current conception of translanguaging: the ideology of monolingualism and the primacy of language in interaction. Afterward I will present and analyze a piece of data to illustrate my position.

1. THE IDEOLOGY OF MONOLINGUALISM

The ‘myth’ of monolingualism is historically shaped by hegemonic political forces that forged space, language, and culture into political identities. Linguists did their part of the job when they codified national languages and made them ‘named and nameable’. However, most modern linguists would subscribe to Weinreich’s aphorism that ‘a language is a dialect with an army and a navy’ and understand monolingualism as a politically enforced mission and vision.
In interactions, people draw on all resources they have in common with their co-participants, and languages are just one type of resource. When confronted with stunning examples as Li Wei’s Extract 2 (where two Singaporean speakers in one short segment of a conversation deploy bits and pieces of five nameable languages), it needs to be pointed out that these speakers will not talk in this way to everybody they encounter. When a Singaporean interacts with a monolingual speaker of, say, Australian English, practices will be different. Translanguaging may be best understood as recipient design in interaction. This term was coined by Sacks et al. in the inaugural paper on Conversation Analysis as ‘a multitude of respects in which the talk by a party in a conversation is constructed or designed in ways which display an orientation and sensitivity to the particular other(s) who are the co-participants’ (Sacks et al. 1974: 727). Recipient design is observable in turn design: ‘speakers design their turns in such a way as to take account of whom they are speaking to, what their relationship is, and especially what that recipient knows and what they know in common’ (Drew 2013: 148). Likewise, participants have an understanding of which languages are proper to use in a specific participation framework, and they design their talk accordingly. Recipient design is possibly the crucial factor in the discussion of translanguaging—but it is painfully missing in the current discussion.

Translanguaging came out of bilingual education in Wales, as reported in Li Wei’s contribution. The fact that two languages were deployed in the language classroom (English by the students and Welsh by the teachers) is primarily remarkable for educators from a radically monolingual teaching tradition. For other educators, it may appear more astonishing that anybody would take bilingual practices in language teaching as a specific innovation. Monolingual foreign/second language teaching appeared quite late in the history of Modern Language Teaching with the direct method in the early 20th century (Jespersen 1904) and was consolidated later by audiolingual teaching. Monolingual teaching is bound to the story of English and later Spanish. In other places in the world and for other languages, bilingual teaching (the use of mother tongue and target language) was normal (Butzkamm 1973/1978, c.f. Mori and Sanuth, this issue).

But things are changing and in many places, second language teaching is not any more monolingual or a mixed setting of first language and target language. As Hazel and Wagner (2015) show, recent practices of teaching languages other than English happen in a different frame. Teachers of Danish as a second language, for example, may only have English in common with their students and need to use English not only for interaction but conceptually for learning:

Students’ competences in their lingua franca English are drawn on as a resource through which to pursue understanding of particular target structures in Danish. Participants here bring their knowledge of grammatical forms of English to bear on the pursuit of securing
When talking to compatriots, students may bring in their native languages as well and create an even more complex mix of languages—but the significance of translanguaging in this environment is the ubiquitous presence of English as a lingua franca. What we might be seeing at least in northern Europe is translanguaging between English and the local language. This is consistent with Mori and Sanuth’s remarks about hyper-utilitarian demand for English.

2. THE SEMIOTIC LEGACY

Obviously, it is not a surprise that ‘language’ is central when discussing translanguaging. The challenge lies in the ambition of some of the papers to include issues of body, space, time, and environment in ‘trans’ terms, such as translanguaging, translingual practice, transmodalities, and so on.

In human practice, the integration of time, mobility, physical objects, space, bodies, and languages is a social fact and empirically observable in interaction (see below). Can translanguaging become a theory that covers that broadly? If translanguaging is aspiring to become a ‘practical theory of language’, everything linguistic would be an object for the theory and everything non-linguistic would not. But it is not trivial to decide where to place the cut and to define what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’ of language. The way the authors and others include body, space, etc., is by subsuming it under semiotics. Li Wei talks about ‘semiotic resources’, and Hawkins describes language as ‘enmeshed with other semiotic resources in constructing meanings in communication’ and as a ‘vast array of semiotic resources that are entangled with language in fluid and unpredictable ways’. So the key that unlocks this broad array of objects for a practical theory of language is that they all are semiotic. This is not unproblematic.

For one, semiotics is in itself a complex field. The authors obviously do not refer to Saussure but rather to Peirce, Eco or Lotman, that is philosophical and cultural semiotics. Still, semiotics is a theory of signs and signification, and while we can agree that meaning processes are the central objects, it is questionable if we can uphold that they are all semiotic. The question is rather whether it is productive to analyze body, space, time, etc., in terms of signs.

Building a ‘practical theory of language’ puts language into the center and subsumes everything else as ‘other semiotic’ resources. This converges with the history of the field: analyses of language and interaction usually start with a focus on language. Over the past decades, however, other modalities were added to the analysis; and gaze, gesture, body movements, and objects are often understood as annotations to what is seen to be central: language. But if we look at these studies, it becomes evident that language is part and parcel of many social practices, but the latter do not always need language (Haddington et al. 2013; Nevile et al. 2014). Further, semiotic studies orient
toward a sender–receiver model, while studies of human interaction are increasingly able to show the co-production of sense by the ensemble of the participants (Goodwin 2017, inter alia). To leave the historically defined path of analysis and tread a new one, one needs to see the relation of language to body and environment the other way around, that is to start with the sense-making process in situ. The goal then would not be a practical theory of language but of interaction, and it would have a great overlap with the work done in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (CA).

3 TOWARD A PRACTICAL THEORY OF EMBODIED INTERACTION

The early CA studies analyzed landline phone calls. This gave an exclusive focus, since language was the only resource the participants had in common. Based on the early data, CA established a cumulative research program to explore the sequential nature of action and practices. However, different from linguistics, the focus on language was accidental, since Sacks and his co-authors were sociologists.

I started to work with tape-recorded conversations. Such materials had a single virtue, that I could replay them. I could transcribe them somewhat and study them extendedly—however long it might take. (…) It was not from any large interest in language or from some theoretical formulation of what should be studied that I started with tape-recorded conversations, but simply because I could get my hands on it and I could study it again and again, and also, consequentially, because others could look at what I had studied and make of it what they could, if, for example, they wanted to be able to disagree with me. (Sacks 1984: 26, my emphasis)

Studying social practices by focusing on language is still central in CA, but over several decades now, a large number of studies have engaged in the analysis of the embodied ways by which humans make sense of each other and their life world (c.f. Nevile 2015 review of 20 years of multimodal studies in CA). Especially the pioneering work of Charles and Marjorie Goodwin has lead to a massive growth of studies of embodied social interaction in its situational environment. Recently, studies of mobility (Haddington et al. 2013), multi-activity (Haddington et al. 2014), objects (Nevile et al. 2014), and human senses in interaction (Mondada 2019; Cekaite 2016) have pushed the envelope for CA studies.

There are currently two parallel lines of multimodal studies with little overlap. One is evolving out of the tradition of Goffman and the Goodwins with a solid base in Ethnomethodology and CA. This line is studying embodied human behavior in the life world, and my analysis is deeply indebted to this tradition. The other one is coming out of systemic functional linguistics (Kress 2010) and is concerned with other (visual) modalities in texts and moving pictures.
In the remainder of this article, I will discuss a short segment to illustrate my points. The extract is collected as part of a small field study in a Danish vineyard. The winegrower (WIN) takes two students (SDA and SSP) on a tour of the vineyard where several volunteers are pruning the vines to give them more light and air. WIN and SDA are Danish, SSP is Spanish and does not speak Danish. The participants speak English with each other. In the beginning of the extract, all three protagonists stand in a triangle outside the vineyard proper. WIN has a bucket of pruning shears at his feet.

Extract 1

1  WIN: well it’s Hhh

   lifts pruning shears out of a bucket with similar shears

Picture

2  (2.6)

   inspects shears, squeezes them, bows down and

   picks another one

WIN bows down and takes a pair of shears. He starts talking (Line 1) while he lifts it, so the reference of ‘it’ is never in doubt. ‘It’ is the thing he just produces for his co-participants. The touched object informs the understanding of the pronoun, and the pronoun indicates that the shears are to be talked about—what Goodwin (2007) referred to as an environmentally coupled gesture connecting talk, bodies, objects, and surroundings. However, WIN abandons his talk when lifting the shears. He stops his talk at the point where the next element to be uttered would be a predicative.

While lifting the shears out of the bucket, WIN’s grip is somewhat special. He grips the shears on one of its handles (Picture 1), lifts it up, displaying the object to the two students. Mortensen and Wagner (2017) describe this pinching grip as not demonstrating any knowledge of the object. WIN uses it here to offer the shears for visual inspection, not yet for demonstration.

He does this next, when he brings the shears up to high chest level (Picture 2) and inspects them visually and functionally by squeezing the handles together.
This grip indicates knowledge of the object. It tests the tool and demonstrates at the same time the use of pruning shears.

Although WIN starts talking, the crucial information for the students lies in the way he presents and handles the object. The presentation affords certain ways to see, and it establishes the reference to the object that WIN is talking about.

When WIN restarts his talk (Line 3), he replaces it’s from Line 1 with we use, that is he changes from a categorical reference to the object to a description of practice in which the object plays a part (l.3)—while still displaying the shears in their joint visual field and looking at it. Still not having a word for it, he abandons his construction again at the point where a referential term is due and initiates a word search (l.3). His co-participants are not of much help. So he offers members of a category (knives, forks) where ‘scissors’ and eventually shears might belong. SSP acknowledges hesitantly (l.6) but without providing
the searched-for word, WIN makes two more attempts (Line 7) but then ends this activity with ‘yeah’ lowering the shears.

10 WIN:  *•hhh +to: uh to cut /away*  
* raises shears again, looks towards vineyard  
+ squeezes shears, starts walking, carrying  
the raised shear in front of him

Pict /pict.3

Picture 3

11 *(1.1) some of these u:h grapes here*  
*starts walking to a line of vines*

In Line 10, WIN proceeds with the turn unit he had initiated in Lines 1 and 3, bracketing the exchange in Lines 4–8 as a side activity. The video shows him preparing the next action by rearranging his body during the in-breath in Line 10, facing the line of vines, raising the shears again (picture 3), while we see and hear him making cutting movements. Then he starts marching toward the vines and drags the students with him. In the pause of 1.1 s in Line 11, he walks four steps silently and then proceeds with his explanation while in motion. Starting to walk while he has unfinished talk makes his co-participants trundle along. So by bodily moving to a new position close to the vines, he produces the arena for his next talk (Broth and Mondada 2013).

The interaction between the students and the wine grower is built by embodied action, objects, movements, and fitting talk. References are created visually and handled by pronouns in the talk. Language, space, and activity refer to each other, and the talk is highly indexical. Further, it is coordinated with the participant’s mobility: the delay in the talk in Line 11 is precisely aligned with WIN moving to the vines he is going to work with next. So the reference of ‘some of these u:h grapes here’ is created by WIN moving close to a plant and preparing further activities.

There is no translanguaging in the extract, although WIN might have drawn on the Danish term, since one of his co-participants is also a speaker of Danish. Obviously a successful word-search would provide a term to build the talk with.
But the term would not further the understanding. The reference is given by the thing in WIN’s hand and the use he makes of it. Translanguaging is a resource not chosen—it would not be a resource for all of them anyway. WIN has chosen to speak in English, the language that will do for all practical purposes. Language is a resource for participants in a specific situation, privileged over other resources because of its possible complexities but not because language is necessary for understanding. References and activities are recognizable by the displayed action in cooperation with talk. During the course of the talk knives, forks become a reference. A little later in the conversation, SDA sums up WIN’s extended explanation with ‘by hand and by fork’ (transcript not provided here).

4. CONCLUSION

In my response I expressed certain reservations about the ambitions toward translanguaging as a theory. The more we learn about the complexities of human interaction, the clearer the role of language for understanding becomes as one resource among others. A practical theory of language needs on one hand to show the specific challenges and affordances of multilingual interaction, and on the other hand, it needs to be part of a larger theory of human interaction to which it can add in significant ways, since the understanding of multilingual interactions is at best marginal in CA and Ethnomethodology. Further research in translanguaging will add a much needed piece to the puzzle.

TRANSCRIPTION KEY

WIN: speaker line
Pict Indication of screen shot
/ location of screen shot in talk
*, + beginning of embodied action indicated in comment line
*,..., +,...+ Duration of embodied action
(0.5) timed pause in seconds
Hhh exhalation
= latching
: prolongation of preceding sound
\rightarrow\downarrow rising, level and falling intonation

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