



# Translanguaging for Equity

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### Opinion

Gone is the naïve belief of a United States defined by the harmony of its differences as the country confronts the ubiquity of vehemence and antipathy towards one another. Almost every day, we see another instance of people's anger erupting in merciless rage. After the January violence at the US capitol, people's vitriol and political angst have fomented destruction, desperation, and death. The anger of the mob was incited by the words of politicians and media personalities, as well as online videos and forums, language that served to rouse antipathy and even hatred. Although it may seem as if we are more divided than ever, I know we are still tethered by our commonalities, stripped of the layers of baked-on circular thinking incited by 24-hour news channels and other media outlets. Although our distinctions may seem more acute, we are still Americans. The motto "Out of many, one" has always characterized this great experiment and will forever mark our path. This Latin phrase has been ingratiated into the fabric of our nation, since its founding, to make visible the diversity of our country while also preserving its unity. Intolerance for others' differences (whether based on race, political orientation, gender, first languages, etc.) still no doubt exists. I do believe one remedy for this disjunction amongst individuals in this multicultural society is empathy for how others see and name the world. I don't mean this in a sappy way, where we should all link arms and sing together. I mean true empathy is in part acknowledging and respecting the different ways in which we express ourselves and our realities through the multiple languages that we speak.

Language and our psyche are intimately connected (e.g., *Vygotsky, 1986*) [1], and numerous scholars have attempted to unravel "the interrelation between thought and language and other aspects of the mind" (p.10). Thinking and expression of that thinking can manifest in a slew of semiotic means. The entwined, dialogic relationship between meaning and representation of that meaning via language is infinitely complex, as infinite as the thoughts we may conceive. Those representations and meanings are even more multitudinous when refracted under the algorithm of translanguaging practice, where utterances can become a bricolage of dialects, vernaculars, and named languages, painting the eclectic complexities of human thought and identity. For example, I speak a little Spanish. Because of this, I can, in part, see the world through a Hispanic perspective. Knowing this other language allows me to gain the perspective of another, for knowing her or his truths using the same words with which they are encoded. By learning and utilizing diverse idioms, we can come to understand the plurality of ways we see the world as a human, regardless of the artificial bounds of nationality or creed. When we can insert the languages of others in our own speech, we engage in dialogic innervation of psyches, of diverse cultures and truths. There is a dance of perspectives as we express ourselves, so multiple perspectives are liable to intertwine, cohabit, and hybridize. This hybridity is what furthers civilization. When we speak in multiplicity, we carry possibility and potential beneath the layers of language. Using diverse languages can be a way we capture that multivoicedness rife in our world.

In a context as rich as US society, where diverse peoples coexist in the same cultural or political space, this hybridity is more acute. There may exist an outward expansion of ideas and perspectives in centrifugal flow to a heteroglossic repertoire of possibilities [2]. Yet, current political realities have also seen a pulling inward, just as equally strong, towards a unitary language with what *Bakhtin* refers to as centripetal forces, as we narrow the acceptable ranges of what the correct responses on a test, the correct accent with which to speak a language, the correct definition of love, or the correct criteria to be considered a citizen, or our political identity. All around the world these days, we see more and more autocratic regimes attempting to consolidate their control by punishing dissidents, expelling undesired parts, and cordoning off those who are considered deleterious. This was also true historically. For instance, Great Britain once used American colonies (e.g., *Georgia*) and entire continents (Australia) to act as penal centers for relocating its criminals (often debtors). What these efforts amount to is a distillation of the native society to a unitary voice or perspective. The same trend is taking place in our education of youths, as teachers and curricula align to standards of learning that dismisses local truths and skills as trivial for the sake of a grand narrative of education. When learning becomes tied to corresponding state or national standards, there is a hegemonic voice that drowns out our students' own. And, the narrow thinking of a few can come to characterize a people.

Language identity correlates with our psychological and cultural senses of self [3], manifesting "distinct cultural memories and beliefs" (p.385). The language with which we communicate with each other, with the world, and even with ourselves, is apt to be composed of distinct language types that all come together and co-construct meaning from the palette of our unified heteroglossic "linguistic repertoire" [3]. Translanguaging, or the fluid movement across named languages, then is about the languaging performance of bilinguals which maximizes conveyance of intended meaning by preserving cultural nuances embedded in language types, meanings that have taken generations to germinate and fluctuate and develop within a particular speech community. The lived and experienced, and co-constructed filaments of significance, those slivers of the local gist amplify the power of translanguaging practices in presenting local truths with fidelity. Translanguaging gives the power to name experiences back to the diverse individuals who actually lived those experiences. So, this type of communication is really a critical praxis that fights back at the centripetal forces sucking Americanness inward until it collapses into itself. The US is a perfect petri dish to cultivate translanguaging practice because of the diverse languages and dialects that coexist here. Translanguaging is one way in which "Americans" can speak "American," and not the language of England. The act in the US is about understanding all of the rich dialects and languages spoken by the inhabitants of this land, to mark their experiences in the same language in which they were encoded. I assert that translanguaging is the US language because this culture is so diverse and pluralistic, that the only language that can ever fully capture the rich tapestry of its diverse history is one that is forever rich with nuance, much like US culture, US politics, the US population, and US values. When our society learns to embrace linguistic plurality and diversity, more diverse students will see themselves and hear themselves in the national conversation. Perhaps an inclusive translanguaging stance toward education and society as a whole may cultivate more tolerant and better-adjusted individual psyches as well. If language and thinking are indeed correlated, then plurilingual, heteroglossic communicative practices may induce a diversity of thought as well [2], of consideration of alternate lived experiences and cultural, gendered, or linguistic perspectives. Translanguaging, like the psychological relationship, is about empathy, about entering into the lived and felt experiences of another, to truly understand another's story. Translanguaging allows us to get to know each other fully and internalize our differences. The act is about a unity out of differences-e pluribus unum [4].



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