Language and the mind: How language shapes our thinking

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Abstract: This paper analyzes languages and their connections to thinking and culture using an autoethnographic lens. This autoethnography utilized personal examples and those from the author’s students' compositions as evidence of the link between languages and cultures. Both named languages and dialects of those languages are contemplated for the basis of how their traits influence perceptions. A neuroscientific rationale is also made between human languages and human cultures. The link between culture and language, including dialects, is made, positioning the act of translanguaging as real time dialogue between cultures. Finally, classroom implications are presented with actual student writing and multimodal performances to showcase how students’ cultures are manifested via classroom engagements, particularly through translanguaging.

Keywords: culture; language; multigenre; multimodality; neuroscience of learning; translanguaging

1 Introduction

Ever since I was a little boy, I have been intrigued by the back-and-forth disagreement and negotiation that goes on within my mind, as if every thought had a counterthought, every assertion a rebuttal. I enjoy how this give-and-take deepened my thinking, making those thoughts richer and longer lasting. For instance, I can recall looking at a rose jutting painstakingly from the slabbled pavement of my neighborhood in Nanjing, China when I was five, being enthralled by its simple elegance, yet it existed in a concrete desert of identical bland apartments. I wondered why this flower was so beautiful to me, this pristine scrunched crimson amidst a sea of monotonous and synthetic gray.

And at that moment of recollection, I saw myself as that five-year-old squatting down to marvel at the flower. This metacognition, this thinking about thinking, incited yet another dialogue of perspectives. At once, I was that little boy
who was taken aback by the beauty of nature amidst an artificial world, and the observer of that boy with all my new experiences and epiphanies. And, now, as I reflect on that memory of reflection, I take another metaperspective, as consciousness of a consciousness of a consciousness. And so, this recognition continues ad infinitum.

To understand the process of my thinking, I first turned to philosophy. In other words, what does a thought consist of, and what is the nature and process of that thinking. My thoughts are always in dialogue with each other, as our recollections may skew past events as distorted reflections in a pond, and new insights are incited by thoughts that are spawned by these perceptions. When I learned during my university studies the chemical and physiological mechanisms of how thoughts are formed and transmitted, my childhood quest to understand how thoughts worked seemed fulfilled. I then understood the process of thinking, of how the mind and body coordinate to author a thought or action. No longer did those philosophy courses earn as much heed, as I shirked a sole focus on the mind for strictly the physical and empirical dimensions of reality. I thought I had understood what the mind consisted of – waves of action potentials (Barnett and Larkman 2007), which are depolarizations of the cell membrane and a change of voltage along the cell caused by an exchange of ions, that coursed along the cerebral cortex. However, I soon realized that although I understood the mechanisms of cognition, the physical machinations, I still did not know how these processes produced a thought, or how certain patterns produced a specific strand of thinking. It was the central Cartesian mind-body problem, whether the mind created the body or the body created the mind, and I was stuck. As an adult researcher of language, I have now turned my attention to how this process actualized thinking. It is language, all different types, that interests me, and how this notion nurtures culture, and vice versa. My current research into translanguaging (García 2009) targets this intrigue, and so this paper explores the link between culture and languages, and then elucidates how translanguaging captures our diverse selves via our verbal engagements.

2 Methods

For this paper to link my personal experiences with my students’ interactions with language, I reflected on my own experiences and ponderings, along with a textual analysis of student writings (Arya 2020). In my musings, I “feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (Ellis 2004: xii) to depict my relationship with language. I feed off my own reflections to conjure an image
of language, using those conjectures as basis for my ideations of the nature of language.

The criteria I used for the selection of student writing were either its composition with a non-English language or the existence of multiple regional dialects or languages within a single piece. Because I taught both in rural Georgia in the southeast U.S. and in south Texas by the U.S.-Mexico border, with rich influences from Mexican culture, and where the dry landscape is made up of large expanses barren of trees, there were different language varieties representative of each locale. In the former, I heard Southern drawls and common expressions, like “bless y’all’s heart”, in addition to standard English, in my classes. In the latter, there was evidence of Spanish, as well as Spanglish, a variety of English mixed with Spanish, in conversations between students and colleagues, such as the phrase “pero, like […]”, which meant “but, like”, joining Spanish and English in a single utterance. In this paper, I also included pieces written solely in Spanish since my courses were nearly entirely in English, their Spanish compositions and utterances could be an indicator of their plurilingualism, or multilingualism, manifesting ulterior dimensions of their full linguistic repertoire.

As such, I recorded my reflections in a notebook, using this, along with student written work, as the raw data for my paper. I scoured through my own memories for crucial moments where I learned something about language. My ruminations totaled 24 pages (about 150 words/page) of notes. I also reflected on my role as a language arts course instructor, and conducted a document analysis (Bowen 2009) of my own students’ work that exemplifies a clear link between culture and language. In total, I reviewed 31 pieces of student work, totaling 47 pages. I coded these artifacts, including my observation notes, for thematic elements, such as hybridity in language, operationalized as the concurrence of two or more named languages, or hybridity in culture, operationalized as the mixture of distinct cultures. In a secondary round of coding, I categorized the codes under umbrella terms resulting in the headings for the body of this paper.

3 My thought journey

It was not until my doctoral studies when I was introduced to the thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin, a linguist and dialogic theorist, that I saw a direct correlation between the mind, that ethereal entity, and the external observable world. Through the words of a particular language, we can give our thoughts form. And, the mechanism to deepen thinking was dialogism. To Bakhtin (1984), that dialogic pattern can be described as:
a discourse and a counter-discourse – which, instead of following one after the other and being uttered by two different mouths – are superimposed one on the other and merge into a single utterance issuing from a single mouth [...]. This collision of two rejoinders – each integral in itself and single-accented – is now transformed, in the new utterance resulting from their fusion, into the most acute interruption of voices contradictory in every detail, in every atom of the utterance. The dialogic collision has gone within, into the subllest structural elements of speech (and correspondingly, of consciousness). (Bakhtin 1984: 209, emphasis and parenthetical in original)

It was this interruption of contradictory voices that characterized my own wonderings as a child. I soon realized this duality could never have a victor, as each voice nullified the other in equal force seemingly forever. Perhaps, it was through this process that understanding prevailed, as this constant negotiation of meaning.

In a dialogue, two disparate entities “must inevitably orient themselves to one another. Two embodied meanings [...] must come into inner contact; that is, they must enter into a semantic bond” (Bakhtin 1984: 189). This joining of perspectives and notions of the world creates a hybridity with notions of each intact, each inevitably influencing the other. In this dynamic, just as with my own thought process, each side “raises questions, answers them himself, raises objections to his own ideas, responds to his own objections, and so on” (Bakhtin 1986: 72), thereby perpetuating the dialogic dynamic.

3.1 Language as cultural dialogue

I realized the way humans have always connected the internal and external worlds is via the use of language, that direct but sometimes distorting conduit of consciousness, defined “as a system [with] a rich arsenal of tools – lexical, morphological, and syntactic – for expressing the speaker’s emotionally evaluative position” (Bakhtin 1986: 84). This relationship, as with any others in the world, is best described by the adaptable, organic principles associated with dialogue via the word, as part of a living dialogue (Bakhtin 1981). But, “no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other” (Bakhtin 1981: 276). In each utterance, there is the breath of another, sometimes in direct contradiction.

3.1.1 Human languages and culture

It is this plurality and multivoicedness that is central to dialogic thinking, this simultaneous existence of a clandestine but always present other, stalking the official sanctioned vernacular. Just as the Germanic languages of Gallic and Germanic tribes
interrupted the reified sanctity of Latin, with its orderly conjugations and declensions, its predictable syntax and phonologies encountering the organic structure of these “uncivilized” tongues. Even after the demise of the Roman Empire, Latin held onto its privileged position in society, adorning official celebrations and formal benedictions, and languages like German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, and English were relegated to the unrefined language of the people. But “outside cultures” also have power, in that in “the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding” (Bakhtin 1986: 7).

In time, English, Dutch, and German became synonymous with European colonial, cultural and military might, with these cultures’ philosophical, scientific, artistic, and musical prowess. These languages then became esteemed throughout the world. The cultural influence of a people bestows their language with privilege and esteem, when it is nothing more than sound waves produced by the coordination of our esophagus, vocal cords, larynx, tongue, teeth and lips. Yet these physical manifestations also correspond to, and are affected by, the cultural and linguistic context of their existence.

3.1.2 Human languages and cultural stories

As diverse languages and vernaculars adorn our thoughts, those cultural nuances color that particular language with particular tints, gifting certain wordings with certain feels, bestowing specific utterances with certain emotions or affects. The language of a culture can at times carry various emotions, either prompted by the phonology or semantics. The meanings of words are also affected by the langue, or written dictionary or societal definition, and the parole, or the specific meaning of the spoken language for an individual (Saussure 1959).

These two meanings dialogue within the mind of the listener or reader, as she or he needs to grapple with two meanings potentially at odds with each other. In this vein, the langue of a word represents the centripetal movement of the word towards a central meaning, and the parole describes the centrifugal expansions of personal definitions (Bakhtin 1981). Simultaneously, from the perspective of the individual, the parole of the word characterizes its centripetal movement to a personalized meaning while the langue represents the centrifugal fleeing of diverse experiences of different speakers of that language to some objective notion.

Such dynamics also characterize a particular culture, with its larger perceived traits and particular insiders’ practices of that culture. There is bilateral tension, a simultaneous push and pull of cultures. This phenomenon is best characterized by the language of that culture. Take the word lit for instance. Its langue is the past tense of the word light, or a condition of a lighted area. Yet, the parole for this word in the 21st century is a state of being excellent or exciting. In the context of U.S. youths, this
word has become another adjective describing positive qualities. What is lit for one person could be different from another, and so this term is a personal one. Although due to its connection with popular culture, there is also a social agreement factor with this idea, so the condition of being lit is tied to certain cultural experiences and expectations.

The disparate meanings of the langue and parole of certain words magnifies the potential of language to encompass personal notions influenced by a culture. Yet, the tenor of language, whether conveyed as conversation, spoken word, hip hop, the lyrics of a ballad, an engrossing lecture, or an interior monologue, represents the indefatigable palpitations of a heart remiss, longing for the world to remember it. I haphazardly toss these together, and they fall from the caverns of my mind, doing cannonballs into puddles of thoughts. This language can capture this noumenal entity and give it breath, rescuing it from eternal anonymity, lost in the abyss of so many other thoughts that vanish in forlorn amnesia.

When cultural and national identities are intermingled and hybridized, a dialogic tussle, a “give-and-take” of beliefs and truths creates a tension-filled conglomeration of positionings (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). For instance, in Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), she described the meshing of geographical space, cultural selves, linguistic identities, and gender/sexuality orientations. Living on the border regions between the U.S. and Mexico of the Rio Grande Valley in southern Texas as a lesbian, she translanguages between English and Spanish (as well as Nahuatl) in constructing a hybrid consciousness through language.

This hybridity and cultural synthesis is most poignant in her description of how the Weeping Woman from Mexican folklore (La Llorona) is actually wailing as indigenous protest from cultural dominance by Spanish conquistadors, and how the Mexican people have three mothers in La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, and La Llorona. The first mother represents the faithful virgin mother, the second the treacherous violated mother, and the third, a mother in search of her lost children. In these cultural folktales, women are presented in three different ways, and the most righteous identity is the first, to whom all women should strive.

All three women have influences from the West and from its indigenous native culture. La Virgen is Mother Mary who appeared before Juan Diego, thereby situating European Catholicism in a Mexican context. La Malinche was a Nahua translator for Cortez, facilitating his conquest of Mexico. La Llorona, a native woman, upon drowning her children in a lake to be with the White man, committed suicide and went before God in Heaven, who told her to return to the lake to look for her children before entering Heaven. In all three instances, colonial themes of fidelity to native heritage are reified and treason of these roots is vilified. In the backgrounds of these
tales, I can hear the eerie hum of forlorn empires penetrated and infiltrated with foreign pathogens.

With these hybrid cultural stories, the culture of this in-between locale transfixes a dialogic consciousness with mixed languages and identities. Within the interstices of borders and boundaries, my language no longer has that purity, the clean sanctity of a eugenic veneer. It is messy, compounded with the dross debris of tumult. Yet, it is in that conflict, that back-and-forth, give-and-take that greater meaning and depth is bestowed. A culture’s vibrancy blossoms from this perilous puncture by other stories, other traditions, and other tongues. In this heterogeneous, heteroglossic, murky brew, multiple veins of being chorus together, each struggling for saliency amidst a pack of others.

Perhaps one cultural story prevails in the end, its taint the most palpable, but that culture, after its interactions with other cultures, changes, its stories muddied, its customs skewed, and its language intertwined with other alien vernacular. Dialogue is this condition of transience, of an inchoate forever, on the threshold of materializing. When multitudinous strands of cognition, these vicissitudes of thought vectors, temper a concept, that notion is now shrouded with all the cultural vestiges that inhabit the thinker.

Aztec legends told via Nahuatl or Mayan fables recounted in Huastec give those stories the same tenors as their progenies, from whence the creator of these stories pieced together the narrative with the phonemes in her or his heritage tongue. The same is true for any other cultural stories. Grimm’s fairy tales retain their full luster in 19th century German, devoid of the tangential additions and substitutions of meaning that characterize translations to other languages. When we learn the languages and cultures of the authors of stories, we are more likely to transact more genuinely with their sentiments. When those languages dialogue with our own, a more vivid transaction of meaning can result.

3.2 Language use as cultural dialogue

Nevertheless, our cultural identities are constructed in our mind, draped over our senses of selves, as our cerebral cortex constructs a self-awareness in its peering onto itself, like a voyeur catching a glimpse of some covert inner ramblings. As the diction for this paragraph arises from my linguistic repertoire, vocabulary in my English lexicon, I fit each to its appropriate syntactical position. Here I see the mind and body conversing with itself, as the body paints the mind’s conjectures and the mind conceives of the body’s processes.

Thus, language, an intangible system of cultural representation, captures cultural meaning as a system of shared understandings between cultural insiders. A
fixed repertoire of symbols attaches to meaning, the infinite shades of reality depicted by a finite algorithm of lexical combinations. The language of a particular culture, like US English or Mexican Spanish, carries with it subtle opaqueness or clarity, depending on the notion. Yet, at the same time, with the spread of globalization, universal notions in our semiotic repertoire unite our common humanity, such as the concepts of beauty (belleza) or wisdom (sabiduría).

Language is thus humanity’s way of tethering these common human verities, along with our insular local/regional experiences, and giving all notions a symbolic manifestation. A culture’s role in the construction of that language is to bestow it with the tint of a collective unconscious materialized from shared historical experience. With the spread of globalization, language diversity and intersectionality are commonplace in many parts of the globe (Blommaert 2010). With this pluralization of vernacular and named languages is also the spread and diffusion of meanings and concepts of reality.

Yet, culture is a construct of the mind, or rather minds, because the notion implies a plurality of members. One’s culture can be difficult to verbalize explicitly, but still be composed of the behavioral and cognitive tendencies of a particular group of insiders. For example, in the rural Southern United States, folks tend to be more socially conservative, more Christian, and are inclined to talk in a particular manner and eat certain foods. In the metropolitan regions, there may be more openness to diverse beliefs and traditions. Elsewhere in the U.S., the disjunction between more urban mentalities with more rural thinking persist, as existed prior to the U.S. Civil War, which was partially due to the economic and cultural disconnect between the more industrial Northern states and the more agrarian Southern ones (Huston 2003).

### 3.3 Translanguaging as synthesis of differences

Thus, intraregional variations flourish to contribute to the larger macrolevel national culture, which then engages with other national and continental cultures (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). In this mix of differences, this bricolage of ulterior motives and mismatched translations, we also produce a transculturation of artifacts and meanings (Arroyo 2016). When a culture enters the awareness of an outsider, that culture is distorted, and when that outsider then relays this culture to another, there is even more distortion. So, a culture is always a hybrid construction, distorted by foreign postulations.

A tangled mesh of perspectives can result, wherein the world is viewed via an entanglement of filaments, as if a multilayered caul is retroactively pulled over your eyes, covering them in a sunken daze, distorting “truths” to a full spectrum of narratives told in the multilingual, translanguaging melody that characterizes our
heteroglossic reality. Translanguaging is practical manifestation and orchestration of the organic heteroglossia that characterizes authentic communication. The practice is colored by multivoicedness and diversity, painted with the full palette of expressive repertoire.

Translanguaging is defined by numerous scholars of this field (e.g. García and Leiva 2014; Lin 2014) as actualizing what Bakhtin (1981) would term heteroglossia, or multivoicedness, a dynamic coexistence of differences. In an unparalleled age of conformity, of standardization and rigid assessments (Williams 2016), translanguaging as a practice adds to the individuality of communication, sanctioning personal, idiosyncratic versions of their dominant language mixed with any other dialects or languages. This is the epitome of heteroglossia, of diverse languages, perspectives, and ways of naming and calling things, of an organic concurrence of multiplicities synthesized by a single speaker. In translanguaging, the meaning of a speaker’s words is described by Bakhtin (1984: 263) as “a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships […] this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types”. Thus, both the form and language type are components of translanguaging (Li 2018a). The multilingual communication in which the speaker engages negotiates meaning with the audience and comes to a dialogic understanding that is mutually constructed via all the languages in the interlocuter’s linguistic repertoires. Translanguaging is this simultaneity of linguistic perspectives participating in heteroglossia, a term which, beyond the nuanced stratifications of a named language, also extends to “the coexistence of different language forms and acknowledges the presence of various languages and dialects, that is, ‘language plurality’” (Blackledge and Creese 2014: 4).

For me, reality is always on the cusp of absolutes, of singular truths, that monolithic skin that veils the complex heterogeneity beneath. Whatever “real” or “true” means, these notions are only the agreements of countless subjectivities. Yet, schemas within our brains are apt to distill slight variations to some singular truth. This monochromatic monoglossia stifles change and growth on our quest for truth. Translanguaging is the simultaneous activation of distinct neuronal pathways for different languages toward a common end – the faithful reproduction of intention.

4 Classroom implications: literacy as reflection and conduit of cultural identity

I have described how language, and by association, literacy is an effective conduit of cultural identities. Minority cultures can be manifested and shared with the mainstream community in a way that evokes genuine understanding and empathy.
However, I do not want to limit literacy as solely the tool for minority cultures. The majority cultures in the U.S. may also utilize language and literacy to characterize themselves.

In the following, I illustrate the link between culture and language, namely distinct named languages and even the dialects of a named language. Such flow across the dialects a person speaks can be conceptualized as translanguaging in the moment-to-moment intentional codeswitching across a speaker’s linguistic repertoire (Martínez et al. 2015). For instance, my first job after receiving my doctorate was as an Assistant Professor in a rural college in Georgia. Most of my students were white, working class, and female. The majority were Christian, fond of rural life, and loved the University of Georgia Bulldogs. In my literacy course, I had my students read picture books out loud each class, and then we had a discussion on them. For one assignment, I assigned my students to compose their own picture books. Via this process, they learn how these books were effective conduits of literacy, with both visual and literary representation of the story. By creating their own, they understood the process of their creation, conjoining two semiotic devices (pictures and words) in the conveyance of meaning. Upon their return from their internship in schools, they also commented on how excited the students were about the read-alouds. Thus, language is not only restricted to words, but also semiotic modalities.

4.1 Picture books

One student composed a picture book titled *Chaddon’s Dream* about her son Chaddon, and his dream of becoming a big truck driver. The cover has a drawn picture of Chaddon lifting his cap with one arm in jean overalls. The illustrated book contained laminated frames of the boy drifting to sleep, and images of driving a semi-truck transporting “Reesy Cups and bacon to the local country store” (p. 4). After work, Chaddon heads to his farm, “where, there is plenty of work to be done” (p. 6) (see Figure 1). On the following pages, he can be seen in his light green tractor tilling endless rows of peanuts and standing next to his semi. At the end, the boy can be seen getting up, and while brushing his teeth at the sink, a thought bubble appears above him of the semi-truck and tractor (see Figure 2).

In this beautifully illustrated book, there is authenticity in constructing life in this context by presenting rural culture as both an inspiration and aspiration. Cultural details, like referring to the candy Reese’s Cups as “Reesy Cups” and the barrel of hay outside the barn give an insider’s perspective to this narrative. On page 10, after a hard day’s work, Chaddon “grabs a drink from the water hose,” representing the textured nuances of country life (see Figure 3). Thus, in this picture book, not only has the student constructed a quality story, in a narrative reminiscent of Maurice
Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, a book we read as a class and studied, she also glorified rural Southern culture. Thus, there was also intertextual influences even as she adeptly conveyed her and her family’s story.

### 4.2 Multigenre projects

Other components of my course also depicted the link between language and thinking, particularly cultural thinking. As another assignment, I had my students compose a multigenre project where they composed several genres of writing around a central theme. One of my students wrote hers on “Living in the South”. On the front cover are two images, one of cotton and one of sweet tea with a wedge of

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**Figure 1**: Page 6 of Chaddon’s *Dream*.
lemon. The first genre was a diary entry in which she recounted cotton as “beautiful South Georgia snow” and going to the “pumpkin patch to pick up some boiled peanuts”, which she described as “delicious, salty, warm bites of heaven”. In a poem, she describes how “It may be eighty-five on Christmas” and how “We also blast off fireworks Each July 4th on papa’s farm” (see Figure 4). For her next genre, she composed a narrative, in which she described “Southern hospitality […] in addition to the sweet tea and the slower pace of living.” On the last page is a sketched picture of cotton bulbs with the labels “Cotton” and “Southern Living” (see Figure 5). Her Southern dialect used alongside standard English can be evidence of translanguaging in actualizing the heteroglossia of the speech community (Li 2018b).

This student was able to depict rural Southern living and culture in a beautiful, artistic, and lyrical way. By using metaphors and rich descriptions, she brings a
poetic quality to life in the South. There is a warmth, literally, that exudes her piece in which she refers to her grandfather as “papa”. By also drawing and presenting images to capture this theme, she brings a multimodal, multifaceted depiction that is intertextual and interdisciplinary. Her composition is multivoiced and multidimensional. This is what I admired about my students’ multigenre pieces. They could not only showcase their strong literacy understanding and versatility, but also bring in diverse conduits of their voice and passions.

Through literacy and language or artistic construction, my students composed and shared their rich cultural repertoire and experiences. Their spiritual, economic, political, regional, artistic and even athletic identities were on full display in these productions. For instance, to teach my students about the genre of stream of conscious, I had my students compose a relay writing assignment in which each

Figure 3: Page 10 of Chaddon’s Dream.

He parks the tractor beside the big truck. Then grabs a drink from the water hose after a long day of work. Chaddon looks at his big truck and tractor with his hands on his hips. He is proud of what he accomplished for the day.
student wrote a line elucidating their thoughts in real time in a font of their choice. They decided to write their paper on why they loved living in Georgia.

I love living in Georgia! The sunsets are beautiful. The peanuts and cotton smell like heaven. Everyone is so sweet down here. Sweet as sweet tea. And the BBQ is so good it makes you wanna slap ya mama. AMEN

The cotton here is like GeOrGiA sNoW!!! And I bet the sunset is beautiful, but I never get to see it because I am always doing homework and studying. Bless yalls hearts. I love the Georgia weather we have. We have good summer for swimming and other fun summer things and we also have cool Winter weather, which is nice for the Holidays. I also love that we are so close to so many things like the mountains, big cities, and the beach. I also very much enjoy the scenery. +
I love the weather in Georgia and that we have set seasons. Each season is distinct. We have hot summers, cool falls, cold winters, and warm springs. I like that it's not always hot or always cold. We get a mixture of all different types of weather. I love living in Georgia because it is close to many fun places. The beach is close, the city is close, mountains are close, Disney is close, whatever you want to do is close!
I love living in Georgia because the people here are very welcoming. It is known for its southern hospitality which I love!
I love living in Georgia because GO DAWGS!
I love living in Georgia because it's nice weather during the fall (most of the time).

**DOES ANYONE HAVE ANY PAIN MEDS. MY HEAD IS HURTING** I have some in my car vroom vroom okay great if we ever get a break i will get it for you I have some in my purse who needs them??Kayla gave us some!! Thank you though ;) I love living in Georgia because people who live here are so much nicer than when you go to different states. :) s
Can we have one of these going every class? YES? OKAY THANKS Yes! Yes
In this excerpt, the students’ regional and geographical identity is evident, as they describe the nearby beaches, mountains, peanuts, and cotton. There is also an athletic reference with the “GO DAWGS!” in allusion to the University of Georgia Bulldogs. They also describe the seasons there and the Southern hospitality. Here, they depict the many dimensions of a rural Southern identity, from the barbecue to the college football, to the common phrases to describe a heightened degree of satisfaction, like “so good it makes you wanna slap ya mama.” Even though these may appear like cliched or stereotypical descriptions of Georgia, my students seemed genuinely proud of those traits of Georgia, as they donned their University of Georgia gear each class (and made fun of my University of Florida affection). College football in Georgia and other parts of the South, because of its storied history, is often even more culturally important than professional football teams (Bain-Selbo 2009). This may be the reason the Atlanta Falcons, the state’s NFL team, which came into existence in 1966, chose as their team’s colors, red and black, to correspond with the University of Georgia Bulldogs existing colors, which had been deeply entrenched in the region’s sporting soul since at least 1901. My students also brought water bottles filled with sweet tea to drink during class each week, sipping while reading and listening to my lectures. I taught there all day on Wednesdays, and on some days around noon, we would all go to Hog N Bones to enjoy barbecue for lunch. Finally, outside our classroom window, we were privy to the endless rows of “Georgia snow” each of us drove past on our journeys to and from campus. Thus, aspects of their writing indeed vividly captured our lived realities.

In this piece, there is clear evidence of switching dialects from a more Southern casual tone in the beginning when writing about sunsets and peanuts and cotton, to a more formal tone when writing about the climate and nature of Georgia. I can hear the different iterations of my students’ unique accents and cadences as I read these phrases and feel the candor of their cultural vibrancy through their code-switching in their writing, displaying their personalities. So, their words and semiotic representations manifested their idiosyncratic cultural and linguistic identities, connecting their lived internal worlds with the voiced external. Also, each student’s voice was in dialogue with the others’, each psyche manifesting and meshing in a conglomeration of others. The elicitation of unfettered representation of their in-the-moment sentiments is further evidenced by one student’s inquiry about headache medication, words capitalized to connote their urgency. Thus, the format of language can also signify the tone of speech and the urgency of their voice.

4.3 Language as cultural dialogue

Even as my Southern students composed their regional experiences through their regional vernacular, they still used English as the means to communicate. In other
words, they utilized their “entire linguistic repertoire” to construct meaning (Otheguy et al. 2015: 283). By not sanctioning only academic language and tone, but another register and tone, I opened up their full expressive repertoires to communicate. Their writing can be conceptualized as codemeshing (Canagarajah 2011), as they switch codes from more formal vernacular to more casual speech, evidencing the modulation of style and tone as well, in addition to register. For instance, when they wrote:

I love living in Georgia because the people here are very welcoming. It is known for its southern hospitality which I love!
I love living in Georgia because GO DAWGS!
I love living in Georgia because it’s nice weather during the fall (most of the time).
DOES ANYONE HAVE ANY PAIN MEDS. MY HEAD IS HURTING

I saw the more formal voice for the first two sentences about why they loved Georgia, which transitioned to a more informal voice when they wrote in all-caps GO DAWGS. This was also directed to me because my students know I am a Florida Gator fan (a rival), and this utterance was meant to pester me, as a class joke. This utterance also captured the rural US southern culture which is fanatical about college football. The next sentence returned to a more formal voice, but the one afterwards was an expression of someone’s personal voice asking loudly in all-caps and bolded for headache medicine. So, the writing switched back to an informal voice conveying authentic sentiments. As a result, their unique cultural voices were made apparent. In my opinion, their engagements with literacy became a more personal, authentic venture.

My students’ heritage rural Southern cultures transacted with my own Chinese American culture, one honed from years of living as a minority in US majority culture contexts, and their own learning experiences became unique dialogic endeavors. This give and take in cultural perspectives also played into language identities, with my English, perhaps tainted with Chinese phonemic qualities, in addition to New England, Maryland, and North Floridian influences. Given my doctoral experiences, I also learned to use the gender-neutral pronoun ze in place of he/she. I made conscious efforts to trouble the white narrative with minority voices. I also infused my PowerPoints with excerpts from seminal authors, like Henry David Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, Jerome David Salinger, and Francis Scott Fitzgerald, along with Richard Wright, Ralph Waldo Ellison, and Toni Morrison. I introduced bilingual translanguaging texts from authors like Sandra Cisneros and Amy Tan. Thus, the language inside my classroom was a dialogic entanglement of geographies, epochs, and ideologies. We analyzed William Faulkner’s characters’ voices in As I Lay Dying and Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird. We noted the intersections of race, class, and gender in literature and their depictions via language.
I had my students construct home language narratives of their families, in which they wrote a typical conversation during a family outing. One of my female students wrote about going on hunting trips with her dad, who taught her the beauty of nature. She wrote: “I don’t shoot at every deer I see. Sometimes, I just gaze at her beauty, as she grazes the grass beneath her, head bobbing, her back etched with resplendent light”. With grace and refined diction, she penned those moments when it was just her and the deer.

4.3.1 Mexican American translanguaging practices

In 2019, I moved to my current professional position in South Texas, teaching and researching at the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley near the U.S.-Mexico border. My students were nearly all of Mexican heritage with some Spanish ability. I encouraged my students to use all the languages that were available to them in their writing. As a consequence, some wrote translanguaging texts, others bilingual ones, and still others almost entirely in Spanish. One student wrote a poem about Mexican immigration to the U.S. in Spanish:

Lo Que Importa
Piel morena como el Barro
Echa de lodo en mi tierra
Pelo negro como el cielo
Oscuro de noche, sin estrellas
Todo eso me recuerda
Una noche como esa
Pues por el rio me vine
De mojada a esta tierra!
[Brown skin like mud
Pour mud on my land
Black hair like the sky
Dark at night, starless
Everything reminds me of
This type of night
Well, I came across the river
From wetness to this land!]

No me dejaron entrar
Por la puerta grande
Pues no todos entran
Solo a los ricos aceptan
Si eres pobre como muchos,
Espera tu tiempo, Te dicen
No les importa que te ahogues
En el Rio mientras cruces
[They did not let me in
Through the big door
Well, not everyone enters
Only the rich are accepted
If you are poor like most,
Wait your time, they tell you
They don't care if you drown
In the river that you cross]

NO les importa que sufras
NO les importa que llores
Aquí lo más importante
Es el dinero, No los pobres!
[They do not care that you suffer
They don't care that you cry
Here the most important thing
Is money, not poor people!]

Inherent in this piece in Spanish is a refutation of the greed of the U.S. painted in the in-between tierra between the U.S. and Mexico. The dark corporeal dimensions etched in the hues of the earth juxtapose from the inhumanity of the current U.S. immigration policies.

Another student recounted her life as a migrant farmer during her childhood with her family:

My older siblings felt more of the sacrifice than the rest of us. They actually began to work in the fields much earlier in the beginning of the year around March in locally owned fields. It has been several decades ago, but I can still remember like if it was yesterday. I can still remember the feeling of having to wake up at 3:30 am and hearing my dad’s voice “rápido, vamonos” (hurry, let’s go). My siblings and I dared not to complain in front our father, but we all dreaded having to wake up so early during what was supposed to be our summer vacation. Which wasn’t much of a vacation at all in fact, as my siblings worked more hours than I ever did, but I guess that was the perks of being the youngest of nine, even though it didn’t make it any easier for me. Life in the fields was definitely no daycare. We weren’t able to leave until the rows were all done no ifs, ands, or buts about it. I could remember my dad saying, “ánimo raza, ya vamos a terminar” (‘Hurry family, we are almost finished’). As my family rushed with the bit of energy that they had left within them to finish before sunset.

In this piece, I could feel the determination and sacrifice of migrant workers who truly understood the meaning of “hard work”. The Spanish words of her father of encouragement sounded veracity and honored her family’s culture and heritage, and their family story. Her father is also characterized as the unquestioning authority figure, one whom is both obeyed and respected. Through these writing assignments, my students’ voices and stories were preserved in their original tenor, honoring their existence as inspiration for literacy in the US classroom.
By using Spanish, another cultural voice dialogued with the dominant language in my classroom. Although the course readings and turned-in writing assignments were all in English, I encouraged my students to use Spanish in class conversations, peer discussions, and in-class writing. I wanted a dialogue, not just of my students with me, or with each other, or even with the class content; I wanted a dialogue within them of all their languages and ways of describing the world. I wanted the heteroglossia of my students’ lived realities.

5 Discussion

Thus, language and thinking can truly be connected, as thoughts retain their original veneer and essence. The dialogism in thinking can be similarly expressed in a dialogic manner, one validating the multiple voices or accents within one’s soul. Each accent colors not only our language, but also our thinking, so there is mutual effect between the word and the meaning. The diction of an individual or group or people affects the collective psyche of that community. The language my students used were reflective of their personal and communal cultures, these expressions of their “emotionally evaluative position” (Bakhtin 1986: 84).

5.1 Translanguaging as authentic voice

Language is the voice of a people, etched with the cadences of a historical collective unconscious. When we encourage the flow together of many languages, we synthesize dissimilar narratives and cultural truths. By encouraging the concurrence of multiple languages and voices in the classroom, whether in speech, writing, or any other semiotic medium, we tether learning to the heteroglossia of the real world. We need inclusive ways to assess the multilingual, multimodal student productions as well, so learning can better connect with students’ realities. Their words can “be used for the most varied and directly contradictory evaluations on the part of the speakers” (Bakhtin 1986: 85).

If thinking and language are indeed wedded, through students’ use of language or languages we can better understand how they learn and transact with learning. When my Georgian students composed formal writing, many lacked their authentic voices, as they parroted the passive sanctioned vernacular to which they were introduced. When my Texan students wrote academic papers, many were just concerned with formal devices, including correct grammar and appropriate diction and
punctuation, and so their writing lacked authenticity as well. It was most often in these more informal writing circles, in-class writing assignments, and writing journal entries that they felt unfettered to transmit themselves, that true self with whom they confided at the end of the day, that voice they listened to at critical moments in their lives.

If the true power of language and literacy is to author ourselves and our worlds, then we need to encourage the use of the full repertoire of our expressive capabilities. I always loved multigenre projects, when students would paint tempera or oil pictures, bake ceramic in a kiln, or build models of scenes from their favorite books. So, students could showcase their talents, like when one student who was a dancer even videotaped her choreographed dance in tribute to her deceased father. In these multigenre, multimodal productions, my students used their own “language”, whether via art, dance, voice, or print, to synthesize their devotions and affinities. So, language can be expressed by and via the entire body, not only our voice or fingers.

5.2 Translanguaging as dialogue

Through translanguaging between languages and dialects, and across mediums and modalities, my students connected their internal worlds with the external, the one in which our individualities negotiate together. Perhaps, this is the essence of language. Language permits our internal worlds to be represented to the external world, and for others to transact with that production in a way that approximates our own inspirations for those creations. The tendencies of a culture are reflected in its language and the usage of that language. As is evident in my students’ works, that language can be so rich and thought-provoking if students are encouraged to use all their expressive languages and modes. Through translanguaging, their voices engage in the give-and-take tussle between their complex semiotic repertoire and their rich intentions.

As a neuronal pathway of a particular cultural narrative or thought pattern, the participating cells are engaged in dialogue with one another. So, in the complex workings of our brains, there is also give-and-take, a palpable “collision of two rejoinders” (Bakhtin 1984: 209) where distinct entities co-construct meaning across the synaptic cleft between brain cells, the dialogic space in between. This in-between condition also characterizes the hybridity and collision of meaning inherent in acts of translanguaging, as personal acts of rebellion against the reified language of academia, where different graphemes, phonemes, and semantics chorus a hybrid consciousness more representative of the heteroglossia of reality.
Thus, language is reflection of this dialogic dynamic, and so by nature, languages and meanings are dialogic as well, especially in their hybridized varieties. Language becomes a verbal or semiotic give-and-take, where parties cross paths and come to enter the consciousness of another, where our thoughts mesh, and we can learn to empathize with others to share some consciousness for that brief moment of synchrony.

Whether it is a distinct dialect, an “unsanctioned” vernacular, or a completely different language, or a dissimilar modality altogether, when students are encouraged to utilize their entire expressive repertoire, their productions become more vivacious, more indicative of the nuances in their mind. Thus, language can become a more faithful ferry for our cognition, of the dreams fabricated by these countless brain cells, firing some sonorous song.

5.3 Translanguaging as a systemic functional linguistic act

These characteristics of translanguaging can thus be positioned within Halliday’s (1978) notion of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which analyzes a language’s forms (e.g. phonology or phonetics), its content (e.g. semantics), and its context (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). First, as languages cross and intermingle with disparate others, there is a marriage of distinct phonologies particular to certain languages. In translanguaging, they often exist in synchrony, as the sounds of different named languages coexist in a single utterance from a single individual. Individuals who engage in translanguaging communication are apt to traverse across multiple phonological systems.

Furthermore, the meaning or semantics of a particular language can also infuse translanguaging utterances with ulterior significance. For instance, in expressing “I want to cross la frontera”, one may mean “I want to cross the border”. But, there is a second meaning of la frontera, meaning the frontier. Thus, with this translanguaging Spanish-English utterance, I am also injecting a hidden alterity into my expression. This deliberate use of diction across my heteroglossic linguistic repertoire gives me agency to broker meaning by strategically sculpting my semantics to meet my intentions, either crossing the border or the frontier.

My own intentions and languaging strategies thus depend on the context of communication. I may decide to use a certain word in a certain language for the particular social meaning(s) it carries, as in la frontera in Spanish. When used in an English-speaking context, for instance, the two meanings of the word can herald double-voiced discourse or even oppositional semantics. Because the frontier in English has a connotation as a place for adventure, discovery, and exploration,
the meaning runs counter to the other translation of *the border* as a boundary, depending on whether I am using the phrase in an English or Spanish linguistic, or in a U.S. or Mexican cultural, context. Thus, the practical context of language usage can give translanguaging utterances different meanings and intentions.

Thus, I see more clearly how translanguaging can depict the complexities in culture today, by mixing and purposefully employing different named languages and dialects to author a sentiment. Our thinking can be influenced by global cultural norms and experiences beyond our immediate settings, which are given representation by another culture’s particular language. Those non-majority sentiments and languages can also represent the unsanctioned undercurrent forever influencing a language, for example in slang, a regional dialect, or esoteric lingo. That hybridity of languages, where there are dialogic innervations between language varieties (formal, casual, urban, rural, etc.), language traits (e.g. in speech and writing) and their conveyed meanings, more holistically depicts the heteroglossia of the reality of modern life. In my students’ instrumental usage of slang and named languages, they depict both the variegated complexities within their mind and the authentic nuances within their cultures.

### 6 Conclusions

From my own ponderings about thinking and language, to my students’ negotiations with language arts and pedagogy, I have learned so much about the dialogic nature of cognition. I truly believe that language arts can be the means in which students can unfetter themselves from the shackles of societal or cultural or linguistic confinements to author their most genuine selves. Bakhtin (1984) wrote about Carnival festivities as a time when the people of the Middle Ages were able to free themselves from the rigid social order and decorum. Perhaps, translanguaging serves a similar function, to free the paths within our brain to venture to the recesses of our minds.

Thought and language are entwined with both individual and collective cultures. Perhaps regions of our brain responsible for certain cultural thoughts or languages produce different feels and meanings. When we encourage our students’ authentic voices, those authentic cultural realities are preserved inside the classroom, and the instructional tapestry becomes more vibrant and lush. Through such inclusive pedagogy, students can connect with each other, with their worlds, and with the genuine worlds of others.
References


