

Ponte las Pilas Mijo: A Story of Translanguaging Español and Inglés and the connection to Bilingual Latinos

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Abstract

In this paper, I was asked to reflect on and analyze a rhetorical practice in a community I am a part of, and so I discussed my personal experiences with translanguaging between Spanish and English. As a child of immigrants from Latin America, my experience being raised between two very different cultures and languages led me to not choose between those identities and forsake one or the other, but rather mix the two in a way that combined my heritage while still embracing the opportunity of a new world and culture. This paper also goes on to discuss how on several levels, using the experience and research of others who have taken a look at translanguaging regarding Spanish and English, what the impacts of this practice are and the effects on bilingual Latinos in the US. I also take a look at how this analysis of translanguaging in academic, literary, and personal practice ultimately helps further strengthen the idea that translanguaging is a practice meant to foster inclusion and embracement of culture and language.

As someone who was born to immigrants from Latin America, language played a very important part of my upbringing and perception of the world around me. Having been raised in a Spanish-speaking household, I would be in a bubble where my ancestral culture and language only existed at home. As I grew up and began seeing how translanguaging impacted and intertwined with many aspects of the Spanish and English language, I realized that this was far from the truth. For you to understand what the connections made in this story mean to me, and Latino culture, and how translanguaging has impacted my ways of communicating, I believe that it is necessary to understand what translanguaging is specifically. Translanguaging is defined as an idea where “rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed, all users of language, select and deploy

particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts” (Vogel & Garcia, 2017, p. 1). “But what does this mean?” you might ask. Simply put, translanguaging is a practice where speakers of multiple languages combine aspects of those languages in one format of communication. It may seem like something complex, but it is something quite common today. A simple way to put it, Spanglish is a form of translanguaging.

Chapter 1: A World of My Own

My mother and father raised me in a primarily Spanish-speaking household, and as such I only spoke mainly Spanish most of my toddler years, yet I learned English through reading books and watching television. My parents even took it upon themselves to teach me as much English as they could before I started kindergarten. It was here I started translanguaging, though I was not truly aware of it at the time. At home I would often ask my parents questions in Spanish, with either one or a few words in English; other times the opposite would occur, where I ask the question with a few words being in Spanish, the rest in English (aka Spanglish). I remember asking my mother at times “Quiero ir a comer at home tengo hambre” (I want to eat at home, I’m hungry). One time I remember talking to my dad about an episode of Thomas the Tank Engine I watched and said, “El tren is red just like your camion Papa” (The train is red just like your truck). At this time of my life, my use of translanguaging was done more out of habit of wanting to speak both English and Spanish, but I was unable to pick between the two languages. My parents would also engage in translanguaging when communicating with me, often speaking full sentences in Spanish with certain words being spoken in English to give me context and a way to understand the points they’d be making for me.

When it came to my translanguaging in other environments at this point in my life, such as in school, I realize now that it worked to my benefit, as it allowed for me to retain my cultural identity while still ensuring I was capable of learning in an English-based curriculum. My experience with translanguaging often came in the form of literature and texts read in class that involved Latino characters who spoke both Spanish and English, and reading those stories made me feel represented and it also made me feel like my experiences with translanguaging weren’t something that only my family and I experienced. This is further documented and supported in “Translanguaging Practices as Mobilization of Linguistic Resources in a Spanish/English Bilingual After-School Program: An Analysis of Contradictions” by Carmen María Martínez-Roldán. Her analysis of translanguaging done correctly displays its reinforcement of learning and developing skills within English and Spanish. Programs where translanguaging shows that when done correctly, reinforces learning and the development of skills within English and Spanish for success in academics, as she states

In this bilingual after-school program, it was clear that the students benefited from the fluid use of language—which I characterized as translanguaging—as they made meaning of literature and digital texts in Spanish and English. Because there were no rules for the separation of Spanish and English, the students asserted their bilingual identities, choosing to read in Spanish and gradually using more English in their reading and their interactions around digital games. (Martínez-Roldán, 2015, p. 55)

While I did understand the differences between English and Spanish in my schoolwork, when I combined the two languages, I felt my sense of belonging in these two cultures was strengthened. Expanding on the points illustrated prior, the use of translanguaging in academic settings can be elaborated on by highlighting how written materials such as books and flashcards, and verbal instruction from educators help students learn more effectively than monolingual education. The use of translanguaging in academic settings helps provide bilingual students a better understanding of both the languages through the use of practices that they might actually use at home. Being bilingual myself, it can be said that my development of translanguaging has grown alongside the growth of my language skills and ability to communicate monolingually in either language, as it is the development of the language skills in both English and Spanish that help me translanguage effectively.

Chapter 2: Cultural Cobija

While throughout my story I have focused on how translanguaging in my life has impacted my perception of my cultural identity and my communication skills, it is also important to discuss how translanguaging is something that impacts the bilingual Latino community in many ways. The concept of translanguaging is something that is more prevalent across this current generation of first-born Latin-Americans, where we are born with access to two very different cultures, languages, and identities. It is because of this I think that translanguaging serves as a bridge for many to connect their cultures and languages to communicate with other Latinos and those with Latino roots in the US.

This also highlights the importance of how educators and those with the ability to teach and interpret translanguaging ensure that translanguaging in academic settings doesn't work against this bilingual demographic in a detrimental manner. This is highlighted in "Translanguaging, TexMex, and Bilingual Pedagogy: Emergent Bilinguals Learning Through the Vernacular" by Peter Sayer (2013), where his analysis of educator's use of translanguaging demonstrates that it serves a purpose outside of academics, especially bridging

the gaps that monolingual communication causes. Sayer (2013) stated, “However, the use of translanguaging as a theoretical lens for examining bilingual language practices in a classroom invites us to go beyond previous classroom code-switching work that created typologies of features, functions, and linguistic codes” (p. 84). It is also important to discuss how translanguaging in these types of settings is encouraged, rather than stigmatized (which is something I have experienced on both ends). These experiences, as well as my own, show that translanguaging serves as a blanket for communication so that nothing is left out of the conversation, like a *cobija* (traditional large and rather comfortable Mexican blanket adorned with images ranging from Mother Mary, roses, and tigers, that are synonymous with being Latino).

Translanguaging works to cover the aspects of communication and provide assurance to those where monolingual communication isn’t as effective. Translanguaging itself is more encouraged when educational materials themselves engage in translanguaging and demonstrate how it is a benefit to bilingual students, rather than an obstacle. It can be said that this helps provide further world-building for my story as this opens the door for my experience with translanguaging outside of the classroom setting. It is important that we begin to further explore the effects of translanguaging on bilingual Latinos in general society, as this way of communication is not limited to conversation or class lectures, but something that transcends culture and connects people regardless of how little or how much they know in both the English and Spanish language.

Chapter 3: It’s a Big World Out There

Now that I have provided some examples of translanguaging and how it can be used to help in both personal and academic settings, I think that it is time for us to look at examples of how extensive translanguaging really is in the things we see daily outside of the traditional conversation at home. I have personally traveled to many areas with high Latino populations like Houston, Texas; and Miami, Florida; and I have come to realize that these locations often tailor to the cultural and linguistic needs of those living there. Something as simple as a sign illustrating additional parking despite saying “Mas parking” shows how translanguaging isn’t something complicated that is limited to certain settings; a bilingual reader can easily decipher the meaning of this sign, and monolingual readers would be able to, with context clues, reach the same conclusion. The same can be said for restaurant menus where items say, “Cheeseburger and papa fritas” meaning cheeseburger and French fries. These examples show that translanguaging isn’t some upper-level academic theory put into practice to assist children in special programs, but something that is very common in bilingual society and culture.

This is further highlighted in “Critical Content Analysis of Language in Literacy: Identifying Discourse and Translanguaging in *Esperanza Rising*” by Cynthia Villarreal Cantu (2022). In this article, the author discusses how a book focusing on a young Latina girl who immigrated to the United States amidst

the Great Depression, and the use of translanguaging throughout the book highlights how communication is important in one's relationships, something that transcends time, language, and locations. As highlighted by Cantu (2022), "Through sacrifice, compassion, and patience, the reader can value these assets and become familiar with how the power of language and discourse can form self-identity" (p. 10). This highlights a very important aspect as to why it is people like me translanguage. As with myself and Esperanza and I assume countless others, being a child of immigrants brings its own challenges regarding language. So, it can be said that a major factor that impacts the development and use of translanguaging in Latinos across the United States is the fact that many of our ancestors and family members came here to build a new life. However, with communication being an issue, we translanguage to make sure that we maintain communication with those we care about and sustain ourselves.

Other examples of this extensiveness include my own personal experience in a call center where, during my Spanish calls, I refer to the products my company sells in their English name in a Spanish accent, with me then reading my sales script in Spanish. Even with this, my Spanish-speaking customers get my point, showing that translanguaging exists even in the business world. It is evident that based on the evidence provided, both anecdotal and peer-reviewed, that translanguaging serves a significant purpose when bridging the Spanish and English languages. It should be noted as well that translanguaging allows for speakers to provide context for words that don't translate into the English language very well. Common examples of this include *bodega*, *estrenar*, and *casa ajena*. While these words have no direct English translation, translanguaging can provide contextual meaning to the words in an innovative manner. For example, "I'm going to the *bodega* to buy *comida*", "I'm going to *estrenar* my new outfit at the *baile hoy*", and "It's embarrassing not to not take off my *zapatos* when I'm visiting a *casa ajena*". It's through examples like these that translanguaging demonstrates the ability to fill in the gaps that monolingual interpretations can create, allowing for speakers of different languages to understand the context of what is not just being literally said but what is meant on a different level as well.

Chapter 4: Tienes Que Ser Grateful

Of course, it is also important to highlight other factors at play that impact why people like me engage in translanguaging. Resources families have, especially those immigrant families may have access to, play an important part in the development of language. I was privileged to have access to books and PBS Kids, as well as the occasional trip to Blockbuster Video. Access to these resources gave me the time and ability to develop my English language skills and in turn, develop translanguaging with Spanish as way to communicate. This isn't the same for others and impacts how far others can go to develop their language skills. This is something that resonated with me throughout my childhood, with my parents often reminding me of how fortunate I am for not just the economic security our family had, but for the opportunities I have now at my disposal even

as an adult. A conversation (that ironically involved translanguaging from both sides) I distinctly remember went like this:

Me: ¿ Y porque hay gente que no saben hablar English and Spanish como yo? (Why are there not people that can speak English and Spanish like me?)

Mom: No todos pueden aprender a hablar idiomas como nosotros porque no es fácil comprar libros o películas en inglés y aprender así. (Not everyone can learn other languages like us because it's not easy to buy books and movies in English and learn that way).

Me: Pero no pueden look por otras ways to learn? (But can't they look for other ways to learn?)

Dad: No es tan simple (it's not that simple), you have to remember that stuff we have isn't something people just get for free, you have to be agradecido for these opportunities.

Me: What does that mean?

Mom: Tienes que ser (you have to be) grateful.

This gave me now a deeper understanding of just how valuable translanguaging is when it comes to looking back on what resources I had available at the time to learn English and Spanish. This is highlighted in “Bilingual Latin@ children’s exposure to language and literacy practices through older siblings in immigrant families” by Amanda K. Kibler. et al (2016). The authors who are While the U.S. Latin@ population is extremely diverse, a certain subset of this group, Spanish-speaking children from immigrant families with limited economic resources or expertise in U.S. schooling are often seen having “language gaps” upon entering school that hinder their educational success” (Kibler et al., 2016, p. 64). This strengthens my point regarding how translanguaging is a process that bilingual Latinos such as myself develop over time. The language skills I had at age 5 are very different from those I had at 15, and as a result the need and use of translanguaging has developed accordingly with the resources I had at my disposal.

Chapter 5: The Big Picture

Now that we have taken a very interesting journey throughout the development of my life and language skills and how it plays into what impact translanguaging has had, I like to think that those reading can begin drawing their own connections to perhaps their own experiences or other texts they have read relating to this topic. One of the constant truths of bilingual Latinos that translanguage is that they are always drawing connections between cultures and identities, something that is crucial to identity on not just a personal level, but culturally as well when it comes acknowledging our roots. It is apparent that this is a very common theme among bilingual writers, especially when faced with living in a society that at times can be very hostile towards Latino immigrants and the Spanish language. This is especially highlighted in “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldua. In her texts, she often translanguages, but in

a way that highlights her efforts to preserve language and culture in a way that maintains her identity. It should be also noted that such efforts are in response to other bilingual Latinos who consider the broken Spanish that people like me and Gloria to speak a travesty and offense to the mother tongue. As she discusses in her texts, “even our own people, other Spanish speakers nos quieren poner candados en la boca. They would hold us back with their bag of reglas de academia” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 358). Here she says that other Spanish speakers want to put chains on her mouth with academic rules as their reasoning.

This is something that will always cause some clashing of ideals between Spanish speakers, as words and rules over grammar can vary greatly depending on nationality. An example of this can be the use of *vos* and *tú*, while both words essentially mean the word “you” when being used in speech, it can be considered “improper” and even slang to an extent as it is the informal use of the word (when compared to the formal *usted*). The use of these words depends primarily on where one’s family originates, and as such is indicative of expression of identity when being used. Translanguaging, regardless of the purpose of how it is used, serves as a way for speakers to connect with the culture that they are a part of, regardless of their depth of knowledge of either English or Spanish.

Up to this point, the story I have told is one that explains what translanguaging is as well as explaining the purpose it serves for bilingual Latinos today and the impacts on language and culture, elaborating further on how my story acts as a cultural rhetorics methodology. I look to another bilingual writer, Nicole Lasso, to demonstrate such explanations, especially regarding translanguaging. Her article “Panameño for Dummies” helps highlight how when one takes it upon themselves to explain the concepts that take place in their communities, it is important to understand how language plays a part in determining social hierarchy. According to Lasso (2020), “One thing you need to know about us: we’re easy and quick to judge. We pay attention to how people dress, talk, and their mannerisms to figure out where on the social ladder they belong” (p. 3). Lasso’s explanation of how language plays a role in societal perception is key to understanding the impacts of translanguaging, and to drawing back to my earlier points made about how the economic and cultural factors revolving around immigrant families has an impact on how and why individuals choose to translanguage. This highlights the ethical importance of making sure that since I am a part of this community, the language and communication skills I use should be used to build bridges between cultures, and not denigrate others simply for the language they choose to speak or not speak.

Another personal factor that impacted my methods of translanguaging was my mother wanting to make sure I would never let language be a barrier for me communicating with others, she would often switch between Spanish and English, to keep me on my toes in her mind, when I would ask her why, she would respond: “Porque yo quiero que nadie te mira como tonto. Ponte las pilas mijo porque te nacistes en los Estados Unidos, land of the free and the home of the brave, brave, y estas capable la idioma de donde vienen sus padres y de donde

nacistas”. She said she didn’t want anyone to take me for a fool, especially because of the fact I was born in the US and I’m capable of the languages of where I was born and where my family comes from. *Ponte las pilas* in its figurative meaning essentially means to “get to work” and not let the opportunities at my disposal waste away.

Conclusion

Finally, we have reached the end of this story, in which I explained the meaning of translanguaging, and my experiences as a bilingual Latino with translanguaging. We explored the impacts of translanguaging across different facets of society, from the simplest to those that have profound impacts. We discussed why translanguaging takes place, as well as the factors that determine how an individual may choose to translanguaging. Translanguaging is an idea and practice that has impacts beyond the words spoken in conversation; translanguaging bridges cultures and generations, serves to help connect those in a new world, and allows for people like me to communicate in ways more effectively and deeply than monolingual communication ever would.

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I am a senior majoring in Psychology on the Clinical track. My career goals include pursuing a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology to work on mental health research within Latino communities, with a focus on combating mental health stigma and substance use. Ultimately, what I would like readers to take away from reading my work is that culture and language play an important role in shaping one's perspective and approach toward life and it is the intertwining of those factors that lead us to shape the legacies of ourselves and our families.