

Crip Translingualism as Boundary Negotiations in (Im)mobility

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Abstract:

While mobility has been theorized as the desirable trajectory by Eurocentric social and academic discourses, the reality of immobility has not been appreciated. Southern ontologies treat constraints, sedentariness, and boundaries as needing to be respected. While Eurocentric epistemologies assume unqualified human agency to conquer environment and space for progress, Southern communities emphasize the need for co-existence and mutual respect for the claims of land, diverse communities, and other beings. From this perspective, there are boundaries that have to be respected as diverse communities undertake their mobility agendas.

This article draws from Southern ontoepistemologies to theorize disruptions and constraints as resources in meaning making. It draws also from theorization in disability studies, which addresses the paradox in the word “crip.” While being crippled poses disruptions in mobility, rupture also generates new insights and possibilities into the routine flow of life. The article explains how *crip translingualism* would treat ruptures, constraints, and boundaries as resourceful for meaning making. This is a corrective to theorization that has treated translingualism as based on unrestricted flows and fluidities, influenced by modernist orientations to mobility. I illustrate from a classroom literacy interaction where the ruptures posed by the heritage languages of multilingual students motivated everyone to adopt creative strategies to expand the meaning of “meaning,” redefine literacy as negotiated, and develop ethical dispositions to collaborate in communicating across language boundaries.

U A I L A

Introduction: The Paradox of (Im)Mobility

The translingual orientation has been associated with social developments such as mobility, globalization, postmodernity, and superdiversity by scholars in the Global North (e.g., Blackledge & Creese, 2017). In being theorized as promoting processes of fluidity, creativity, and agency, it has been unwittingly influenced by dominant ideologies of 16th century European enlightenment which present mobility as relentless human movement towards conquering geographical boundaries (i.e., space) in the interest of teleological historical progress (i.e., time)—see Canagarajah, 2021. While creative new meanings and transformation of grammatical and social structures are important, we shouldn't lose sight of the complex and challenging negotiation of borders and boundaries that accompany these mobility processes and agentive practices.

As a corrective, there are increasingly more studies in applied linguistics on immobility. Scholars are studying the communicative consequences for refugees and immigrants (Capstick, 2022), who are creative in overcoming their constraints through translanguaging. Others are also considering how immobilities enforced by restrictive language ideologies are resisted by the creative translanguaging of minoritized students and communities (Probyn, 2019). However, discourses on mobility as progressive and beneficial are still influencing our discipline to treat immobility as undesirable and restrictive. The fact is that both mobility and immobility can be treated as progressive or undesirable by different

communities as they relate to their social and geopolitical conditions. Consider that forced mobility (in cases of war and climate change) is not appreciated by victimized communities. Similarly relative “immobility” in the form of sedentary life that communes with one’s own land is valued by indigenous communities.

There is therefore a good justification for not focusing on the mobility/immobility dichotomy, but studying how boundary management determines variable outcomes for different communities in (im)mobility processes. The nature of the boundaries and the ways they are managed by different social groups have different outcomes in mobility and immobility. Consider how the immigration policy in diverse Western communities channels (im)mobility in different ways for different groups. In the US, for example, highly skilled migrants (in the STEM professions) are “wanted but not welcome” (Zolberg, 1987, p.36; i.e., often they are attracted on temporary work permits but can be sent back when they are not needed); refugees and unskilled laborers are *neither wanted nor welcome*, and kept outside the nation’s border by all means possible; but venture capitalists with huge investments are given an easier channel for citizenship as they are *both wanted and welcome*. Thus immigration policies configure boundaries to provide varying (im)mobility prospects to different social groups. Therefore, sociologists Mazzadra and Neillson in their book *Border as Method* propose that (im)mobility is a form of boundary management. They argue that it is borders that should be the focus of analysis, and not flows.

Applied linguistics will benefit from a keener sensitivity to boundary negotiations as shaping communicative flows, resources, and strategies. We have to also treat boundaries in expansive ways as not only physical boundaries such as walls erected to keep others out of countries or neighborhoods. Boundaries could also be policies and institutional structures that include or exclude access to different social groups in education, housing, employment, and civic life. Boundaries can also be virtual, such as the spaces desired by diverse language and cultural groups for their own development. Others have to respect the social spaces, identities, and relative autonomy desired by these communities. Boundaries are also ideological, as power differences and inequalities pose inclusion or exclusion to different social groups. When boundaries are socially constructed, we have to consider who constructs them and for what objectives. Unfair and exclusionary boundaries such as monolingual schooling policies or racist treatment of migrants should be resisted. However, all boundaries can always be renegotiated, even by those who are marginalized and excluded by them. For this reason, I think of boundaries as posing an interesting paradox: though boundaries always cause constraints and limits, they also generate new knowledge, resources, and communicative practices. The outcomes will vary situationally on the resources different social groups enjoy for negotiating the boundaries and the reciprocity they encounter from others in social interactions.

Crip Translingualism

As pointed out earlier, translingualism has also been associated with an unbridled, even resistant, communicative agency and creativity in some strands of scholarship. While power differences, norms, and inequalities have been acknowledged in many translingual studies, they have been overshadowed by the outcomes of creativity and diversity. Moreover, constraints posed by such boundaries have been treated as inimical to productive communication and needing to be resisted or overcome. Disability and decolonization studies help us appreciate that constraints can be creative and generative of new possibilities (see for fuller discussion, Canagarajah, 2023). This doesn’t mean that one should condone unfair boundaries and exclusions. Even when they are resisted to make them more inclusive and just,

marginalized people still generate positive dispositions, strategies, and knowledge. For many disabled and colonized people who are thrust with varying constraints for almost all their life, staying inactive or passive till all constraints are removed or overcome is not an option. They still carve out positive strategies and outcomes within the conditions around them, relentlessly negotiating these boundaries for more inclusive life and ethical interactions. Furthermore, a life without constraints is not an option for anyone. Unqualified agency or unmediated action is a myth. Vulnerabilities, constraints, and limits are fundamental to life. Decolonial and disability studies adopt a nondualist epistemology and flat ontology that go beyond traditional European modernist hierarchies of mind/body, human/nonhuman, and language/objects. They hold that all entities mediate each other and, thus, present checks and balances to everyone as they negotiate outcomes with relational dispositions.

The adjective “crip” from disability studies brings out the paradox of constraints effectively. Coined by Robert McRuer (2006), the term draws from connotations of immobility, vulnerability, and disruptions. However, crip theory articulates that these constraints enable nonnormative knowledge and action that are creative and effective. The adjective has now helped coin other terms that capture the positive outcomes constraints generate. For example, “crip gain” connotes how disabled people experience texts and knowledge differently through their nonnormative and vulnerable life conditions that provide them a vantage point that differs from abled people (Davidson, 2016). Davidson discusses how writers who became deaf or blind during their career, found new strengths and resources for their communication. Consider John Milton, who became blind late in his life. Most literary critics observe that his poetry during the visually impaired phase of his career is more rhythmic and musical. This is explained by the fact that he composed his poetry through his ear and dictated them to a scribe after he became blind. He composed with his eye when he wrote his poetry in the first phase, lacking the affordances for musicality. This outcome illustrates the benefits of crip gain.

Cripistemologies is “ways of knowing that are shaped by the ways disabled people inhabit a world not made for them” (Lau, 2021, p.3). Disabled people may experience the world differently and, thus, develop a knowledge of the world that is nonnormal but valuable. Eli Clare (2017) narrates how their orientation to the environment from close to the ground as a paraplegic is unique. Therefore, Clare resists any cure that will take away that experience. Consider also how blind people experience the world differently when they don’t have the distinction between darkness and light. Their sense of space is different from that of abled people, who sometimes depend on blind people to help them navigate environments which are dark.

We have to also rethink the notion of efficiency as tied to accomplishing outcomes and activities quickly and economically. “Crip time” spells out that “Rather than bend disabled minds and bodies to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled minds and bodies” (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). People have observed that slowness, nonlinear trajectories, and working in fits and starts may have their own benefits. They give time for reflection, detachment, and new connections between resources. Scott Wible (2013) talks of the World Social Forum where some complained about the inefficiency and slowness in having to translate all languages. However, the slowness of the interaction gave time for the delegates to reflect on their deliberations and accounted for more congenial outcomes for peace and co-existence.

Since necessity is the mother of invention, disabled and marginalized people also hack technological resources creatively for their own advantage. This activity has been labeled “crip technoscience”

(Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019). It is said that resources such as the bicycle, fax machine, and text messages were invented by the disabled people to facilitate their activities. Eventually these inventions became resourceful to everyone. We can imagine how the marginalized might use objects and instruments in nonnormative ways to make their communication possible. Many of these objects become extensions of their personhood, shaping their resourceful communication and activities.

Similarly, scholars in decolonial studies have pointed to the ways their communication differs from that theorized in dominant orientations in modernist linguistics. They point to the constraints marking colonized communities, and how they develop creative strategies and dispositions for meaning making. Gabriella Veronelli refers to the “fractured locus” from which communication arises in the postcolonial world:

Complex communication enacts the fractured locus in ways that enable the speaker to communicate very differently, away and even against dehumanizing meanings made through the coloniality of power, language, and speech [with] an openness and disposition to learn each Other’s meanings that validate the opacities, contradictions, tensions, and uncertainties that emerge in intercultural communication (Veronelli, 2016, p. 414, 416)

Communication is “fractured” because indigenous languages and cultures were suppressed by colonial powers during domination. Colonial impositions of meanings and languages have also treated local resources and knowledge as deficient, thus stultifying their development and coherence. Their present-day socioeconomic conditions also create limited access to resources. If transparent meanings are a myth in any communication, they are even more distant in the discourse of multilingual and multicultural communities. Their very diversity poses challenges for transparency. For all these reasons, Veronelli argues that colonized communities can’t even talk to each other for allyship. However, Veronelli articulates a different orientation to meaning making under these conditions. What she calls “complex communication” focuses not on the *forms* of communication, but the *dispositions* people bring to construct meanings. She articulates these dispositions as openness to learn from each other and leaning into the nonlinearity and contradictions of communication rather than treating them as detrimental to communication.

Indian sociolinguist Khubchandani points to another source that generates vulnerability in communication and the need to adopt relational ethics. It comes from the multilingualism in the region:

The edifice of linguistic plurality in the Indian subcontinent is traditionally based upon the *complementary* use of more than one language and more than one writing system for the same language in one ‘space’ (Khubchandani, 1997, p. 96).

He discusses how this kind of diversity is disorienting to communities in the Global North, who expect one language at a time and a shared code to ensure transparent meanings. In the South, “complementary use of more than one language” involves not only one speaker using multiple languages but the presence of multiple languages in a single interaction—as in polyglot dialogue, where each speaker sticks to their own language but engages in a shared conversation. The region has also had a long historical tradition of written texts featuring multiple languages and scripts simultaneously. The graphocentric tradition of literacy in the North allows only one language at a time in writing. Such multilingual landscape does create challenges in communication as interlocutors have to negotiate the

boundaries posed by the languages they don't understand. However, Khubchandani is unfazed by this vulnerability. Like Veronelli, he says that meaning making is facilitated by relational dispositions:

Individuals in such societies acquire more synergy (i.e., putting forth one's own efforts) and serendipity (i.e., accepting the other on his/her own terms, being open to unexpectedness), as they develop positive attitudes to variations in speech (to the extent of even appropriating deviations as the norm in the lingua franca), in the process of 'coming out' from their own language codes to a neutral ground (Khubchandani, 1997, p. 94).

He identifies at least four dispositions that help people in the region to communicate across language boundaries. Synergy is the willingness to expend one's energy in trying to understand the other party's norms and develop collaborative outcomes. Serendipity is an openness to unpredictability in processes and outcomes of communication. The third disposition is a positive attitude to variation, thus assuming diversity (and not shared homogeneous norms) as a fact of life. The fourth disposition is a willingness to move out of one's comfort zones to meet other parties and their norms in hybrid spaces. If such dispositions are adopted, Khubchandani envisions the paradoxical possibility that even norm deviations might be appropriated to become shared norms between communities.

Shifting our Orientations

Such possibilities of meaning making from vulnerabilities, constraints, and boundaries call for a paradigm shift in our orientations to language and communication. Both disability and decolonization studies start their orientation to communication from a different ontoepistemologyⁱ. Because Modernity adopts a dualist orientation to ontoepistemology and adopts hierarchies and binaries such as mind/body, human/nonhuman, and cognition/matter, it follows different procedures in its knowledge making and communicative activity. It imposes a hierarchical and binary order on the world in order to facilitate its knowledge and communicative practices. On the other hand, because of their nondualist orientation, disability and decolonization studies start with messy and entangled conditions, but generate meaning through relational dispositions. In sum, Modernity assumes and imposes an order to construct meanings; decolonization and disability construct orders out of entangled multiplicity. Therefore these movements adopt different meaning making procedures, as I will contrast them below:

<u>Modernity</u>	<u>Disability/Decolonization</u>
Objectification	Embodiment
Autonomy	Relationality
Order	Becoming
Certainty	Unpredictability
Control	Vulnerability
Norms	Dispositions
Representational	Non-representational

The dualist ontoepistemology leads Modernist approaches to objectify communication for detached analysis. Languages and texts are separated from the environment and interlocutors to facilitate objectivity, the valued analytical approach of European Modernity. This approach also treated language or text as autonomous, disconnected from their entanglement in other social and material domains and resources. As we know, Saussure's principle of synchrony valued the analysis of grammar as a static and abstract system. In cutting off language from social and historical contexts, structuralism also treated language as *sui generis*—that is arising and functioning by itself without causation by other conditions. In a similar way, classicists around the early 20th century, developed an orientation to texts as detached and transparent. In the theorization of "autonomous literacy," texts were defined as primarily alphabetical, visual, and self-standing, contrasted from the ways orality is embodied and is context-bound. Texts were presumed to encode meanings and communicate their meanings transparently from a writer to a reader without being mediated by other resources. Thus European theorists posited the textual product as traveling across space and time freely to communicate its meanings (see for a detailed discussion and critique of modernist orientations to literacy, Canagarajah, 2019a).

The meaning making potential of language or text was understood as located in its "deep structure". This approach called for an interiority—i.e., looking inside the language or text for its rules and norms. Scholars looked for the abstract grammatical structures as the building blocks of communication. Similarly in writing, scholars looked at the rules of text structure. In the field of composition, scholars have identified them as different types of paragraph structures, thesis statement, topic sentences, and rules of cohesion and coherence. This procedure of identifying the finite rules that generate infinite meanings in diverse contexts gives tremendous control and certainty for meaning making and analytical methods. Scholars can give an account of how meanings are generated by pointing to these rules. They can devise pedagogies aimed at developing proficiency for learners by teaching these rules. Participants in an interaction can also be perceived as following these rules in order to construct transparent and predictable meanings (for a discussion and critique of modernist orientations to language competence, see Canagarajah, 2018).

These constructs enabled Modernity to manage communication and knowledge in an ordered and orderly way. This approach was in keeping with the humanist belief that people were agents over their environment and could understand and regulate their environment by mastering the principles of operation through their superior cognition and reason. The objective analytical approach was theorized as ensuring final answers in a world that was closed, pliant, and inert. There was an order to the world, and identifying the principles of its operation enabled humans to facilitate progress, control, and development. Language was given an important role in this enterprise as it was theorized as representing the meanings and knowledge available to humans and housed in the mind to help us make sense of the world and regulate it for our purposes. These assumptions were informed by the orientation of *representationalism*. That is, knowledge and meanings were open to representation (i.e., given tangible and visible identity through language and texts). They were accessible to the efforts of reason and cognition for interpretation and analysis. And the best way to approach them was through their represented rendition in texts and artifacts. Language was the primary medium for representational meanings.

We will now see how decolonization and disability movements adopt a different orientation to meanings and knowledge, treating vulnerability and not control as the foundation of their enterprise. Their orientation arises from the nondualist ontoepistemology which motivates them to refrain from

separating language from its embeddedness in social and material environments. Their refusal to adopt hierarchies and binaries also steers them away from logocentrism. They treat languages as mediated by diverse other semiotic resources, each of them having their own different representational possibilities. It is for this reason that these movements consider even objects and bodies as capable of indexing meanings in their own way and also mediating language in its meaning making potential. Language itself is perceived as embodied and indexing the meanings it carries from its histories and spaces of use.

This orientation to language and texts as embodied and embedded in material and social contexts calls for a different orientation to analysis and meaning making. It is not through detached and rational approaches that meanings and knowledge are constructed or interpreted. One has to lean in towards all the resources and domains working together to understand the meanings generated. Relationality is about the give and take of all mediating resources in meaning making. Rather than appropriating or controlling meanings as one desires, people have to engage with relevant social networks, material ecologies, and semiotic resources. This practice involves coming out of one's own self and engaging with others with suitable ethical dispositions of collaboration, tolerance, patience, and humility for distributed practice. We might say that one has to respect the boundaries of the other mediating agents in working for meanings. Decolonial and disability studies treat all of the entities as agentic, unlike the modernist orientation which treats only humans as agentic. This reality of "hybrid agency" (Latour, 1996) calls for the give and take of negotiating the interests and characteristics of all parties in outcomes.

As the meanings thus generated are contingent on diverse factors in this activity, meanings and knowledge are always in a process of becoming. That is, meanings cannot be controlled and predicted. Participants have to be open to negotiations proceeding in different directions based on the pressures and identities of mediating agents. This practice of meanings as always emergent speaks to the creativity in communication and knowledge. However, they also create a profound sense of vulnerability and unpredictability—the very realities which Modernity tries to avoid as inimical to human progress and mastery. This vulnerability and openness are also generative of new strategies and resources for meaning making. Participants have to be always open to the interests and pulls of different parties as they revise their footing and terms of negotiation. While individuals or specific social groups might feel powerless to carry out their own agendas and interests unilaterally, the collective and negotiated outcomes can be more rich and rewarding to everyone. They ensure the interests of all parties and respect the checks and balances required for social co-existences and environmental sustainability.

This orientation to meanings is richer as it is not based only on the representational meanings indexed by language and apprehended by reason or cognition. Decolonization and disability studies are attuned to the range of embodied meanings that go beyond representation. This will include diverse non-representational meanings that are affective, aesthetic, and performative, as I will illustrate below. Modernist inquiry has treated meaning in a reductive manner, limited to meanings that can be paraphrased or empirically addressed. The emotional impact left on us by language and other resources, the sensory impressions generated on us by the objects around us, and the affective resonances that are "pre-linguistic," are meanings worth being sensitive to.

Non-representational resources are also relevant to the practices of meaning making in the alternate ontoepistemology. While Modernity focused on grammars, norms, and rules as tangible features of the deep structure that generate meanings, the other two movements move all the way in the other

direction to nonrepresentational dispositions. Grammars and norms of language cannot account for all meanings. This is partly because communication is always changing, diverse, and negotiated situationally. Even in a “single” language such as English, there are diverse varieties and registers. Add to this the complexity of diverse semiotic resources mediating language and generating meanings as shaped by different social networks and material ecologies. The semiotic resources and contexts are so variable that any rule formulation cannot account for all meanings. Furthermore, the way these resources configure in each interaction cannot be fully predicted or modeled. What might help us are the dispositions we bring to negotiate these variable resources and conditions for meaning. We might recollect that Southern scholars such as Veronelli and Khubchandani articulated suitable relational dispositions that help people from marginalized backgrounds to lean into their diversities, vulnerabilities, and language boundaries to make meanings.

This orientation creates the additional vulnerability that meaning making is not fully in the hands of individuals. It is a matter of distributed practice. That is, meanings emerge between people and environments. While Modernity promoted the agency of the individual by providing representational norms that each person can use to generate and predict meanings, disability and decolonial studies develop the position that individuals are powerless by themselves to manage meanings and knowledge. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers articulates the shift of orientation aptly: “The liberal tradition represents citizens as autonomous, rational beings who enter freely into social contracts by which they agree to be bound in return for rights and protections. . . . A focus on disability provides another perspective by representing human society not as a collection of autonomous beings, some of whom will lose their independence, but as a community of dependent frail bodies that rely on others for survival” (Siebers, 2008, p. 182). It is not only disabled people, but everyone is treated as “dependent frail bodies.” Hence the need for distributed practice to achieve shared outcomes. It is in this way that any interaction is at heart an ethical enterprise—i.e., it requires moral values on how to engage with others for inclusive outcomes.

It is important to now define translingualism from the perspective of this theoretical orientation. As pointed out earlier, translingualism has to varying extents been influenced by the liberal modernist tradition of meaning making. Though linguistics has greatly changed beyond its heyday of structuralism and transformational generative grammar to bring a more emphatic social and material orientation, these efforts have not changed the dominant paradigm sufficiently. Even recent movements such as social cognitive or social cultural models have adopted the dominant ontoepistemology of Modernity—i.e., in assuming the dichotomies that valued cognitivism, logocentrism, and humanism, and treating bodies as static or inert (see Canagarajah, 2018, for a critique). These assumptions have hindered them from developing a truly distributed practice for meaning making. Translingualism too has featured assumptions such as the following on communication in some circles:

Communication involves primarily linguistic resources working together for meanings;

It requires the agentive role of humans (speakers and interlocutors) negotiating languages;

It demonstrates the agentive capacity of languages to overcome restraints of ideologies and structures to develop meanings and identities;

The meanings generated are representational, and appeal to people’s reasoned capacity for shared, verifiable, and transparent meanings;

Individuals can develop the competence for translingual communication by mastering the finite grammars, knowledge, and skills that help negotiate meanings.

While translingual scholars did always assume the reality of norms, structures, and constraints, decolonial and disability perspectives add more complexity to translingual practices in the following ways:

Communication should go beyond the primacy of linguistic resources to acknowledge the equal role of other semiotic resources and environmental resources in both mediating language and indexing their own meanings;

It should go beyond the efforts of individuals to encompass the networked activity of distributed practice where social agents and material bodies participate in each party's hybrid agency for meanings;

Meanings go beyond those that are literal and paraphraseable to more nuanced affective, performative, and embodied meanings that are always emergent, with no specific empirical resource capable of fully indexing them;

Engaging with such diverse resources and contingencies poses vulnerabilities and constraints, and the need to respect the boundaries of all parties, for a negotiated give and take in communication;

What might help translingual practices under such conditions are not a set of norms, rules, or skills, but the generative dispositions that can be adapted variably and creatively in diverse contexts.

I label this orientation *crip translingualism*. This orientation can address some misunderstandings of translingualism in the past. The celebration of creativity against boundaries and vulnerabilities has mistakenly given the impression to critics that translingualism disregards power differences and the claims of heritage languages and cultural identities in favor of fluidity (see Kubota, 2016). Though most translingual scholars have always defined these claims as part of translingualism (see Canagarajah, 2013a), they have been overshadowed by the discourses of creativity and agency. A crip translingualism that treats vulnerabilities and boundaries as a starting point might better answer the concerns of some critics.

It is a mistake to interpret translingualism as a dissolution of all identities and heritages—or even of all boundaries. It is not difficult to reconcile translingualism with the need for certain communities to maintain their heritage language and identity. To begin with, heritage languages are themselves made up of diverse verbal resources, as no language is pure (Canagarajah 2019b). Heritage languages and identities are empowering ideological constructs and they are important for the identity and group solidarity of their respective people. The notion of crip translingualism as boundary management emphasizes that language contact and creative interactions start from the point of affirming the groundedness of communities and interlocutors. Translingualism starts from one's own positionality and embodied identity. Dissolving cultural/linguistic boundaries and borders would lead to the imposition of a dominant community's norms in the name of harmony or the construction of purportedly neutral third spaces which are illusory. Translingualism is about negotiating boundaries and identities with a give and take, in recognition of other people's as well as one's own embodiment. Though this boundary

recognition might sound as a constraint to some, it can also serve as a creative resource to work out more inclusive forms of communication and outcomes that confirm the generative potential of crip theory.

Boundaries are also constructed by power differences. The powerful construct policies, institutions, and norms that exclude the interests of others. Though unjust power has to be resisted, crip translingualism would hold that even unfair power structures are generative of creative possibilities in communication. This requires treating power as not an evil that will vanish, but a fact of life that will always remain with us. While we should fight to create more inclusive and democratic spaces all the time, we are not going to ever countenance a time when life will be free of power differences or colonizing impositions. In this sense, boundary negotiations are an ongoing process, as sources and groups of power will structure life in ways that exclude others. However, colonized communities will testify that even centuries of living under colonization didn't lead to suppressing their resources and identities. They rather generated rich and resilient dispositions, strategies, and resources that strengthened their struggle for sovereignty. In this way, we should treat power also as a constraint to be negotiated for creative communication. Resistance has meaning when power is not treated as a boundary to be avoided or eliminated, but strategically engaged to both reconstruct more democratic structures and also generate richer dispositions, knowledge, and communicative resources.

Illustration

I now draw from a course I taught, to demonstrate how boundaries of various types generated more creative practices of literacy and meaning making. This example comes from my teacher research of a literacy course titled *Teaching Second Language Writing*, intended for upper level undergraduate and master's degree students in applied linguistics (see for the full report of this classroom ethnography: Canagarajah, 2013b). It consisted of an equal number of international/multilingual and American/"native English speaker" students. While the course featured readings on literacy theory and writing pedagogy, the main pedagogical activity was the writing of each student's literacy autobiography. This was a semester long activity. As students wrote their drafts, they posted them online for feedback from their peers and the instructor. I assumed that this exercise would simulate good practices of composing (such as serial drafting, revising, responding to feedback, and editing) that the students would model in their teaching. The writing also gave students an opportunity to reflect on their literacy trajectory in the light of theories of writing and their peers' trajectories and experiences. Through such processes, the writing would provide a means of critical reflection and identity construction, important for future teachers of writing.

As in naturalistic studies, I observed the processes of learning and writing as they emerged in the course designed as dialogical and ecological. "Dialogical" meant that I treated learning as evolving from the different interactions we had in the course—with peers, students, texts, and other materials. By "ecological," I assumed that all resources in the learning environment shaped the writing and learning. This course design enabled certain conflicts to manifest themselves, and the teacher and students to negotiate them as relevant for their interests and identities. I will explain how this approach allowed for a richer learning and writing where we were open to the diverse outcomes of course interactions across the linguistic and identity boundaries of the participants.

The boundaries in this course were of many kinds. As a course in an American higher educational institution, we were all aware of the treatment of formal academic English register as the norm, and

detached objective tone and expository genres as preferred for writing. The presence of American “native speaker” students (who initially presented themselves as not proficient in foreign languages) reminded the international students and me of the boundaries in using our own languages in the classroom. As we were all learning and communicating in USA, we were also mindful of the national context which set up its own ideological boundaries on what language was permissible. Besides, as a course which included students with diverse languages and cultures, we had to be mindful of the proficiencies of other students as we adopted our own resources. However, there are always spaces and affordances to renegotiate these boundaries in practice—i.e., “decolonial cracks” as theorized by progressive scholars (Walsh, 2018, p.82). As a multilingual instructor, I signaled my interest in critical academic literacies that made spaces for diverse discourses as relevant for students’ identities and interests. Also, the readings I chose were a balanced selection that introduced the dominant norms as they emerge through research and policy, but also familiarized students with critical questions and creative practices of minoritized scholars.

It was clear that all the students were mindful of the policy, institutional, and national boundaries as the course began. At least half of the students, consisting of both international and American students, chose to approximate edited American English with minimal mixing of other languages or registers, and adopting a straightforward linear structure with a dependence on published sources to bolster their experiences and claims. In this sense, they leaned more towards conforming to the academic boundaries. A few other students gradually developed the motivation and strategies to resist the dominant academic norms in their writing. Though they too started their essays with formal prose and linear structure in deference to the existing boundaries, they gradually negotiated them to develop more creative strategies to represent their voices and interests. However, the constraints set by the dominant norms, policies, and ideologies motivated these students to develop more creative discourses and writing strategies. If they hadn’t taken the boundaries seriously, their writing would have lacked the rigor, creativity, and richness it later demonstrated. In more elaborate analysis elsewhere, I show how the creativity of students over multiple drafts became gradually more complex and resistant, demonstrating the way they calibrated their texts to negotiate the boundaries (Canagarajah, 2013b). Such students wrote nonlinear narratives where they meshed events from their literacy trajectories and scholarship to develop their themes in more indirect ways. They also meshed different registers (literary, poetic, and conversational with academic register) and different languages (their own heritage languages and vernacular Englishes with formal English). Though their peers struggled with making sense of these more atypical and creative texts initially, and sometimes resisted the deviations from the established academic norms, they also gradually respected the backgrounds and preferences of the writers to develop more ingenious ways of interpreting and making sense of these texts. The disruption and vulnerability generated by less known languages and genres turned out to be beneficial in motivating new reading strategies. I will illustrate our engagement with one student’s writing to show how our negotiation of boundaries and constraints ended with all of us developing richer meanings from writings, expanded notions of “literacy,” and the development of relational dispositions that would be an asset in other (im)mobility interactions.

Consider the writing of Buthainah, an undergraduate student from Saudi Arabia. After a “native English speaker” student, Rita, wrote a creative draft (with a montage of different scenes and texts from her childhood, and a mixture of literary and academic prose), Buthainah adopted a similar style of montage for her essay. She also chose to mix her heritage Arabic in certain strategic ways with her formal English

in some places. Her very tentative and gradual deviation from the norms proceeded eventually to drafts where her Arabic was translated only in passing or clues given subtly for the careful reader to shape their interpretation. Rather than loosening the boundaries, Buthainah was thus gradually strengthening them by fronting her heritage more prominently and demanding more from the reader. I illustrate from the most difficult occurrence of her writing where her Arabic was not translated or interpreted. I suggest how we engaged with the vulnerability created by this textual boundary to develop creative forms of reading and meaning making.

In her final draft, Buthainah introduced an Arabic text in the beginning of a section which started thus:

~*~*~*~

و من طلب العلي سهر الليالي بقدر الكد تقتسم المعالي

يغوص البحر من طلب اللآلي يروم العز كيف ينام ليلا

أضاع العمر في طلب المحال و من رام العلي من غير كدّ

علي بن ابي طالب

When I was in fourth grade, I became sincerely interested in enrolling in the Communication Club (CC). Students in the club have the opportunity to give a speech in front of all of the attendees at the school. The advisor for the club, however, restricted those who may enter that club by requiring the interested candidates to submit an essay about nutrition. Since my desires to be a member of that club were high, I did not mind writing the essay and submitting it for an evaluation. I understood that whatever knowledge I will gain by being a member of CC would be helpful. That writing competition was my first of many that ended with success, ma sha Allah. Later in the week, the advisor informed me of my acceptance. Upon hearing my acceptance, I was thrilled to be a part of the Communication Club. [P.S. Later that year, I found that CC lacked the factors of entertainment and coolness.] . . . (D6)

As we can see, after the section divider, Buthainah starts with an Arabic text and then continues with the narrative of another episode in her literacy development in English. The Arabic text was not translated, alluded to, or paraphrased before or after this space.

Buthainah herself mentioned different reasons for adopting this strategy. As this course was designed as part of my teacher research, I had opportunities to interview all the students, conduct stimulated recall, and perform a member check after an initial pass at interpreting the classroom data. In an early interview, Buthainah said: “Translating this poem would take so much of its value and providing a two sentence explanation will not do any justice for these few lines. [. . .] Leaving it stand alone is more powerful.” It is possible that Buthainah is thinking of other rhetorical or performative effects of these lines, as she knows that the literal meanings won’t be accessible to others in the class since they are not proficient in Arabic. It is possible that she is focusing on outcomes beyond representational meanings, which I elaborate below.

On another occasion, during a stimulated recall procedure (where I pointed to her atypical section divider and asked for her explanations), she said: “Symbols work as another way of expressing myself. I used Arabic, poems, French, and now symbols. Limiting myself to one language is – ironically-- limiting But, experiencing more than one language, we are able to express ourselves in different ways or the

best way. So, symbols serve as another ‘language’ that words may not be the best tool to express.” She considered the motif in the divider as having cultural significance for Muslim people. We can expand the implications of her statement beyond the multimodal communication of the section divider to the Arabic itself. She might be treating the Arabic text or calligraphy as also communicating meanings at the symbolic level.

Asked specifically about the lines in question, Buthainah mentioned in another stimulated recall: “I thought that if I kept it in Arabic, the reader would be eager to continue to reading to get to the meaning of this poem.” This is a clearly performative explanation for her crip translanguaging practice. She is assuming that the difficulty created for her readers will motivate them to keep working for clues and resources. She treats the language boundary as generating a curiosity and a challenge most readers will take up in order to make meaning. Along the same lines, when I shared my early interpretation of her use of Arabic as a creative strategy, she jotted down in the margins an additional reason why she used Arabic: “Giving a sample or a taste of the experience that language learners go through to those who never experienced it, which may help them understand these stories and experiences better.” This is a performative meaning closer to the theme of her own writing. Buthainah’s essay discusses the prejudices she faced when native English speakers insulted her on her faltering attempts at learning English. Her Arabic is a way of turning the tables on those who laughed at her. She is asking how it feels for them to be confronted with texts or languages they don’t understand. This makes her interlocutors themselves experience disadvantage, constraints, and difficulties. The Arabic will thus make them appreciate the challenges for multilinguals in learning new languages and develop in “native English speakers” the dispositions of patience, humility, and solidarity to collaborate with others for meanings across language boundaries.

I now want to quote a few examples from the comments of the students in the class to suggest how they made meaning in the face of such unfamiliar languages and texts. These are statements from the online peer comments in response to Buthainah’s drafts. Mike, an Anglo Canadian student, observed: “To me, a non-Arabic speaker, this quote is a beautiful collection of alien writing, fascinating but incomprehensible. It is a statement to me that there is something Buthainah understands that I do not. It is a move that distances me from Buthainah but also leaves me intrigued and interest[ed] in reading more.” The observation confirms Buthainah’s expectation that the difficulty will motivate readers to read her essay closely for meaning. The difficulty leaves Mike “intrigued and interested”—i.e., affective responses that are also a significant dimension of the meaning created by Buthainah’s writing. The boundary faced in attaining the literal meaning of the Arabic lines also helps Mike appreciate the materiality of the text. He appreciates its “beauty.” He is probably referring to the Arabic font. He is not far from an important dimension of meaning for many communities which value calligraphy as part of literacy. Eunja, a Korean student, also observed: “Written Arabic - How elegant language it is! (I’m not quite familiar with spoken one^^).”

Tim, an Anglo American student, demonstrates Buthainah’s intended effect of turning the tables on “native English speakers” to understand the challenges in language learning and multilingual communication. He said: “By not translating you are excluding a wider audience, your non-Arabic speaking audience from being able to engage fully with the text. Perhaps you are challenging them to bridge that gap as readers. That if they want to gain access to your writing (to a piece of you, perhaps?) they have to meet you halfway somehow.” He understands that Buthainah is deliberately erecting certain boundaries from others for a reason. She is goading her readers on to negotiate the boundary

for meaning making. As Tim realizes, he has to come out of his comfort zone and meet her halfway to bridge the gap. This performative effect of drawing readers out of their comfort zones and language norms to engage with the reader is another affective experience that is important in meaning making.

Christie, another Anglo American student, learned more than one lesson from this encounter. She observed in her post: “Although, last week I wrote that she explain her Arabic poems, I now feel that they are a key part to her narrative. She is indirectly showing us, the reader, who she is through these poems... Perhaps it is up to us to figure out the significance of these words?” As Buthainah persists in maintaining the Arabic language boundary, despite Christie’s request to remove it, Christie realizes something important about affirmative heritage identities in communication. The Arabic is metonymic of Buthainah’s identity. Therefore it is an important part of her embodied writing and communication. Christie has to engage with the text with the full acceptance and acknowledgement of Buthainah’s heritage, and not disregard or avoid it. Secondly, Christie is made to change her mind (and interpretation) as she engages with the multiple drafts of Buthainah temporally. That is, though she had earlier felt that the writing will be more effective if Buthainah translated the poem, she now feels that the difficulty has its own meaning which is even more significant and affective. What we see here is that the language boundary turns out to be educational, as it provides new insights into the nature of writing and interpretation. This self-criticism and new realization too are an important aspect of affective or experiential meanings.

The most surprising response was that of Rita, another Anglo American student. She was very laid back for much of the peer interaction, remaining unfazed by the language boundaries. When I interviewed her on her unusual response, she said: “I trusted my classmates to explain what was important.” Though it might sound as if Rita is not making personal efforts to understand Buthainah’s Arabic, she points to a different strategy of interpretation. She realizes that meaning making is collaborative and looks to clues that others in the class might provide. She also realizes that the important aspects of Buthainah’s Arabic will come up in the peer conversations or discussion. We might say she is relying on the social “uptake” of relevant semiotic resources for meaning making. If some texts or semiotic resources don’t gain uptake, they are probably not significant for meanings, at least for this community of readers in this course.

Though I have pointed to different types of meanings we generated, such as the performative, aesthetic, affective, and identity meanings, we did also make efforts towards interpreting the literal/representational meaning of the Arabic. We did this by reading the Arabic in the complete spatial, textual, and material context of where it was situated. We looked for clues beyond just the words, to diverse other visual semiotic resources. First, the consistent pattern of using the Islamic motif for section dividers suggested to us that the Arabic lines that followed the divider related to the new episode Buthainah was narrating in that section. The arrangement of the lines in six parallel parts (or three adjacent parts) gave us the impression that it could be verse (with the author’s or source’s name at the bottom). The placement and organization of the lines gave us the sense that this might be an epigraph. We assumed that epigraphs are not directly part of the narration but comment on it obliquely. Therefore, we proceeded to read her narrative in that section in English. She was narrating a challenge given to her to join the coveted Communication Club in her school. By writing a successful essay in English, she attained her goal. We therefore assumed that the lines probably related to a theme such as “Hard work pays” or “No pain, no gain.” In making these assumptions, we were adopting fairly common-sense inferences about spacing, fonts, and line arrangements. When I again interviewed Buthainah at

the end of the semester, she mentioned that the poem talks about pearl divers who work all night under the sea and emerge in the morning with pearls in their hands. Though we didn't catch the metaphor about pearl divers, we did manage to understand the moral and the intent of the epigraph quite successfully. By going beyond words to understand the Arabic in its full textual, spatial, and social context, we came very close to interpreting the literal/representational meaning of the lines.

Though acknowledging the boundaries and negotiating them made us vulnerable in our meaning making interactions and, thus, our interpretive efforts were more effortful, protracted, and indirect, the activity turned out to be more rewarding. I will point to three outcomes—i.e., the expanded range of meanings, redefinition of literacy, and cultivation of dispositions:

As we can see, our interactions generated a range of meanings beyond the literal and paraphraseable. It is possibly the fact that there were language boundaries, disrupting our ability to infer the literal meanings from the Arabic, that opened us to more diverse non-representational meanings. As I observed, we interpreted diverse performative, aesthetic, affective, and identity meanings from Buthainah's challenging translanguaging practice. We also learned to treat meanings as embodied, and interpreted the meaning of the Arabic linguistic resources in relation to their spatial, material, and social embeddedness. Furthermore, the challenges motivated us to go beyond our habituated forms of reading and expanded our understanding of literacy. We had all been schooled in the dominant model of autonomous literacy which treats texts as presenting transparent meanings, which can be inferred if we approached the textual product with the linguistic clues available within it. We had treated the author as responsible for encoding the text with its transparent meanings by careful use of language. However, the language boundaries in Buthainah's writing forced us to break from this individualistic and colonizing assumptions and work towards meaning making as relational practice. That is, we respected the boundaries and developed creative strategies to work with all the constraints for meaning making. We collaborated with the author, and diverse semiotic resources beyond words, and the classroom social networks, to engage in distributed practice. We didn't treat meanings as transparent but unpredictable and contingent on the nature of the negotiations involved. This meaning making activity developed some valuable dispositions in all of us. We learned to be more collaborative, even across our divide as "native" and "nonnative speakers" of English, or host and immigrant community members in the US, in a politically charged context of (im)mobility. We learned to be patient, humble, and tolerant of the interests and preferences of others in our communicative and learning activity. We developed the relational disposition to work with diverse social networks, environmental ecologies, and semiotic resources rather than expect transparent meanings to be offered on a platter according to our own norms and expectations.

Conclusion

This classroom interaction of participants with diverse mobility trajectories helps understand the value of translanguaging as boundary negotiations. This emphasis on the vulnerabilities, constraints, and ruptures deriving from boundaries helps me formulate a crip translanguaging. As in crip theories, I demonstrate how this engagement with constraints and vulnerabilities generates very creative and nonnormative communicative practices. Translanguaging as boundary negotiation helps us go beyond the dominant modernist ontoepistemology that influenced some scholars to treat translanguaging (and all communication) as agentive, humanist, and representational, based on the mastery of linguistic resources (even though diversified). Crip translanguaging motivates us to adopt nondualist

ontoepistemologies based on decolonization and disability studies. They shift translanguaging towards the treatment of meaning making as always unpredictable, contingent, and nonnormative as they emerge from diverse semiotic resources that are embodied and entangled. Therefore we have to adopt the dispositions of relationality that would help us lean into the boundaries and constraints to generate meanings through distributed practice. For such a practice, which is becoming ever more important in a world of (im)mobility where there are always unpredictable and variable norms, a focus on representational meanings and resources (such as knowledge, grammar, or skills) is ineffective. Relational dispositions and ethical values to draw from all relevant resources, and to engage in a give and take with diverse agents across communicative boundaries, are more important.

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ⁱ Since ontology (i.e., our understanding of the nature of reality) shapes our epistemology (i.e., how we make knowledge about reality), scholars discuss them together as ontoepistemology.

Draft