

CHAPTER 5.

MESSY LANGUAGE, MESSY
METHODS: BEYOND A
TRANSLINGUAL “NORM”

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Paired readings:

- Dziuba, Allison, and Jerry Won Lee. “Post-Aristotelianism and the Specters of Monolingualism.” *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2021, pp. 257-269.
- Lee, Jerry Won and Christopher J. Jenks. “Doing Translingual Dispositions.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2016, pp. 317-344.

*This chapter argues for the need to adopt methodological decisions in a manner that are in alignment with translingual realities. If translingual practice, as the scholarship suggests, is inherently “messy,” then we need to seek out a way of adopting “messy” methods that can help us make sense of the chaotic and unpredictable ways in which we encounter and engage with language in its varied forms in the context of globalization, characterized by what Blommaert describes as “a messy new marketplace.” I respond to recent calls in scholarship to pluralize primary and secondary source citational practices and reflect on my experiences publishing in the field to consider what is to be gained by attending to diverse epistemologies, specifically with attention to the uneven geopolitics of knowledge production (Canagarajah, *Geopolitics*) and the need for a “disinvention” (Makoni and Pennycook) of normative epistemological stances. Afterwards, I describe how the methodological priority for understanding the realities of language in this messy new marketplace is an anticipation and indeed embrace of “messy” research methods.*

In their 2011 *College, Composition, and Communication* article, Bruce Horner, Samantha NeCamp, and Christiane Donahue argue for the need to move

composition scholarship away from “English only” toward a translingual “norm” (269). At first glance, their argument is convincing because we do live in, to borrow the words of the late Jan Blommaert, a “messy new marketplace,” in which language practice is increasingly chaotic and unpredictable (28). English is obviously not the only language in the world, and it can indeed be argued that the “norm” is not the isolated use of English or any other language for that matter, but the hybridized use of multiple languages and registers to communicate across linguistic and cultural difference in an increasingly globalized world. In addition, in an effort to capture the realities of such “messy” languaging in a messy new marketplace, it has become important to pay attention to the ways in which communication occurs not simply through “language” alone but through other communicative resources (Pennycook and Otsuji). Yet, from a methodological perspective, Pennycook argues that “we cannot merely add more semiotic items to our translinguistic inventories, but need instead to seek out a way of grasping the relationships among a range of forms of semiosis” (“Translanguaging,” 270-271).

Following an analogous line of reasoning, this chapter argues that, in this messy new marketplace, we should focus not only on adding more languages to our primary and secondary source inventories, but need instead to adopt methodological decisions in a manner that is in alignment with the dynamics of translingual practice. Put differently, if translingual practice is inherently “messy,” then we need to seek out a way of adopting “messy” methods that can help us make sense of the chaotic and unpredictable ways in which we encounter and engage with language in its varied forms. In this chapter, I first return to Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue to describe some affordances but also limitations to their proposed approach to establishing a translingual “norm.” I afterwards return to some of my previous publications and reflect on my experiences publishing in the field to consider what is to be gained by attending to diverse epistemologies, in line with Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue’s point, but specifically with attention to the uneven geopolitics of knowledge production (Canagarajah, *Geopolitics*) and the need for a “disinvention” (Makoni and Pennycook) of normative epistemological stances. Afterwards, I describe how the methodological priority for understanding the realities of language in this messy new marketplace is perhaps not the establishment of a translingual “norm” but, more generally, an anticipation and indeed embrace of “messy” research methods.

TOWARD A TRANSLINGUAL “NORM”?

It is no secret now that the field of US composition studies has in many ways been a “monolingual” discipline. As Horner and John Trimbur problematize, composition curricula in institutions of higher education in the US are guided

by a tacit policy of English-only monolingualism (“English”). Paul Kei Matsuda argues that the field is guided by a “myth of linguistic homogeneity” in which it “assumes the state of English-only, in which students are native English speakers by default” (Matsuda 637). The issue, of course, has not been limited to multilingual students who speak a language other than English. Vershawn Ashanti Young, noting that the practice of insisting that African American students “switch” to standardized academic English in formal writing contexts reinforces a racialized stratification of “academic” English over African American English, argued for an alternative paradigm of “code-meshing,” or “allowing Black students to mix a Black English style with an academic register,” which is “more in line with how people actually speak and write anyway” (713). Suresh Canagarajah would later develop Young’s concept of code-meshing, exploring how such a practice could be beneficial to users of World Englishes as well (“Place”).

And while a wealth of scholarship had problematized, and continues to problematize, the monolithic curricular assumptions shaping the teaching of writing in US postsecondary contexts, Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue’s 2011 article was unique in that it shifted the attention to ideologies of monolingualism guiding research and scholarship in the field as well. As they rightly point out, composition studies “operates on the tacit assumption that scholarship in composition is located–produced, found, and circulated–in English-medium, US-centric publications only” (271-72). They further note that the issue is not only the fact that composition scholarship is published only in English but also the fact that secondary scholarship cited in the field is overwhelmingly English-language sources. The corrective that Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue propose is what they describe as a “‘translingual’ model of multilingualism” (270), which is guided by a series of assumptions including the fact that “languages and language boundaries are fluctuating and in constant revision” and that “mutual intelligibility” is prioritized over “fluency” as a static concept (287).

While Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue are correct to identify the epistemological limitations of the tacit practice, if not policy, of monolingual ideology in composition, it would be productive to revisit some of their suggestions. To begin, though they emphasize the need to engage with non-English sources, it is important to think through what constitutes an “English” source to begin with. By raising this question, I do not mean to reiterate Canagarajah’s point that English has always been translingual (*Translingual*) or Pennycook’s point that English is a language “always in translation” (“Always”). I am instead alluding to my work with Allison Dziuba, “Post-Aristotelianism and the Specters of Monolingualism,” in which we explore the extent to which rhetorical studies can imagine itself as moving “beyond” Aristotle. Though I need not rehearse the entirety of the project here, relevant to our present inquiry is the fact that, by comparing 15 different

English-language translations of Aristotle, Dziuba and I show how one’s conceptualization of Aristotelian thought can differ markedly depending on which English-language translation is referenced. It also became clear that identifying and acknowledging the translator of a given text, whether in the bibliography and to a lesser extent within the main text of the article itself, was not common practice. This reflects, on the one hand, the “translator’s invisibility” as described by Lawrence Venuti, the paradoxical condition by which “[t]he more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (1) but also, on the other, the reality that it is difficult to assume whether a text that has been translated into “English” is a reliable or accurate representation of the text to begin with, which in turn raises the question of whether the text can be categorically “English.”

An intriguing account of the challenges of delineating language according to conventional “codes” is found in Jan Blommaert’s landmark work, *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*, which presented sociolinguists and other scholars in language-oriented fields a framework for making sense of the complexities of language in the era of globalization. One of the more memorable examples from Blommaert is the unusual case of a sign for a chocolate shop in Tokyo called “Nina’s Derrière.” Though “derrière” for a chocolate shop is at first glance “a rather unhappy choice,” Blommaert argues that its function in this context is not “linguistic” but rather “semiotic” (29). More specifically, it indexes “a complex of associative meanings” that can be “captured under the term French *chic*” (29). Such dynamics can be conceptualized through the heuristic of spatiotemporal scales offered in the book. As Blommaert argues, given the multilingual realities of globalization, many individuals practice multilingual competence not through what Monica Heller has called “parallel monolingualism” (5) but rather through what might be called “truncated” multilingualism, by which speakers use not “languages” but rather “repertoires” (103). This is perhaps best explained in Ofelia García’s conceptualization of translanguaging, which calls attention to the fact that many individuals who speak multiple languages do not necessary view them as static and separate entities but as existing and accessible through a “continuum” (47). Languages, in other words, are not merely “codes” but better understood as a “mobile complex of concrete resources” (Blommaert 47). Critically, as Blommaert argues, the extent to which such mobile resources are (or are not) attributed value can be understood in relation to scales of time and space by which they are invoked and circulate:

	Lower Scale	Higher Scale
Time	Momentary	Timeless
Space	Local, situated	Translocal, widespread (34)

Importantly, such scalar ordering is a dynamic process and increasingly unpredictable in the era of globalization. Simultaneously, the manner by which certain language resources come to be distributed and mapped according to scalar logics has a tendency to reinforce extant intercultural and interlingual power dynamics.

The case of the mobility of French-origin language resources, “derrière” or other choices, in particular, whether in Asia or another part of the world, is a reminder that the distribution of language resources and their spatial or temporal upscaling capacities is an inherently uneven process. In the case of French, one needs to acknowledge that French, like English, is a dominant language in the contemporary geopolitical order. Not dissimilar to the case of English, the dominant status of French did not occur automatically: it was colonially imposed in many parts of the world, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America and is a direct beneficiary of whiteness and European cultural hegemony. If this seems like an obvious point, I must confess that it was not for me, at least when I first read the piece by Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue. I realized this when I received a reviewer report for a manuscript on Korean/American translanguaging practice I had submitted to a high-profile journal in composition studies. I was struck by one reader report in particular, which recommended that I reference a series of French-language texts, including the same ones that were referenced in the Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue article. I couldn’t help but wonder, why did a paper on translanguaging in the global Korean context need to be accountable for and situate its theoretical premises in French before it could earn a readership in US college composition studies? Imagine, for instance, the uproar if an author of a piece of French-English translanguaging was told that they needed to engage Korean-language references to the complicated history of Korean as a translanguaging language.

This is, of course, not to suggest that Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue’s suggestions should be dismissed outright. For instance, in my 2016 article, “Doing Translanguaging Dispositions,” co-authored with Christopher J. Jenks and published in *College Composition and Communication*, we included a Chinese language abstract in addition to the English version. Based on a global classroom partnership between a US and a Hong Kong university, one of the main takeaways of the article was to promote a “disposition” of “openness to language plurality and difference” (318) while also acknowledging that such dispositions can be articulated in unpredictable ways, and in some cases in ways that reflect an ideological commitment to standard language ideology. Though this is a common practice in journal publications in other fields such as applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, it was not and still is not common practice in composition studies. For many scholars in composition studies, encountering Chinese in an article in a

major journal in the field might lead to some cognitive dissonance and, dare I say, be a “messy” experience. What is an Asian language doing being featured in a scholarly resource targeted toward teacher-scholars of *English* composition in US postsecondary institutions? Should we focus on the fact that it is illegible and inaccessible to a majority of its primary readership? Or should we focus on the fact that it is legible and accessible to a new potential readership, who can in turn be invited to learn from, engage with, and eventually contribute to the knowledge being produced in this emergent translingual space?

BEYOND A TRANSLINGUAL NORM

At this juncture, I think it would be difficult to debate the reality that US college composition is a space of linguistic plurality, serving and supporting the literacy needs and aspirations of students from a wide range of backgrounds, whether multilingual or monolingual but otherwise language minoritized. Given this reality, adopting a translingual “norm,” in the words of Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue, would seem sensible. However, I would like to try and take their argument a step further and explore the affordances of adopting a translingual orientation to composition research methodology more generally. At the more obvious level, any time we invoke the possibility of a linguistic “norm,” even translingual, we run the risk of ritualizing behaviors and practices while deviating from the intended purpose of establishing the norm in the first place. Consider, for instance, standard English ideology. Its adherents will argue that establishing, promoting, and teaching a norm helps to ensure communicative efficacy among users. The reality, of course, is that even if the norms were established through well-intended action, the very question of who gets to decide on the norm is a power-laden process which in turn exacerbates all kinds of social and educational inequalities. To clarify, I don’t think there is anything inherently suspect or problematic in advocating for a translingual norm in methodological approaches to US college composition research. Instead, I simply want to suggest that we be open to actively revisiting what such a norm looks like and to avoid a situation in which the new norm, even if translingual, inadvertently creates new inequalities, for instance, demanding scholars to establish reading proficiency in (one more) colonial language in order to earn a seat at the table.

As a way forward, we may need to attend more carefully to what Canagarajah has called the “geopolitics of academic writing,” which encompasses the numerous barriers that academics from the Global South have to face on a daily basis, including biases against non-mainstream varieties of English and discourse styles and reliable access to recent scholarly literature. Particularly memorable is Canagarajah’s description of trying to obtain print copies of relevant research

articles via post in the midst of an ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. He also describes not having reliable access to things like stationary and electricity, things many academics in the US and other privileged parts of the world take for granted. He even describes ethnographic interviews needing to be canceled because of a bombardment happening nearby. Today, Canagarajah is globally renowned as a leading scholar of translanguaging (see, for instance, Canagarajah's award-winning 2013 book, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*). However, I can't help but wonder if translanguaging were as influential today as it were in the early 1990s and an emerging early career scholar in the Global South were to receive a "revise and resubmit" notice requiring them to read numerous French-language resources before their work *might* be considered for publication.

One of the most important, but also frequently overlooked realities of the translanguaging orientation to language is that its theoretical premises can be traced to metadiscursive philosophies of language in the Global South. Notably, scholars have pointed out that communities in the Global South, including those in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia have always managed intercultural communication with little to no regard to language demarcated along clear boundaries or "codes" (see Canagarajah, *Translingual*; Khubchandani; Makoni, "African," "Misinvention;" Silva and Lopes). Among the most influential attempts to desediment the dominance of Global North logics of language is found in Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook's 2005 article, "Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages," in which they historicize how the very idea of "language" is an invention of European epistemology and stress the importance of working toward a "disinvention" of language (137). Disinvention, I believe, can take many forms, and in the remaining pages of this contribution I will explore how it can apply to the question of research methods.

In order to do this, I revisit some points I made in an article, "Translanguaging Research Methodologies," published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* in 2022. I argue for the importance of not only "drawing on appropriate research methodologies to make sense of translanguaging but also how to translanguage research methodologies themselves in our pursuit of understanding language practices that have historically been marginalized in various realms of society and education and overlooked or dismissed by researchers in applied linguistics" (2). Although the article was geared toward a readership of researchers in applied linguistics, I have always maintained that there are considerable overlaps between the fields of applied linguistics and composition studies, not only through the venerable tradition of research in second language writing that by necessity moves between but also beyond. Applied linguistics, after all, is a multidisciplinary field of research

focused on investigating real-world problems and implications associated with language, broadly conceived, and composition is very much a language-oriented practice and institution. My point, therefore, that we need not limit ourselves to mapping extant research methodological premises and approaches onto research data, including “progressive” theoretical frameworks such as translanguaging, applies to research in composition studies as well. Consider, for instance, the approach of establishing a theoretical framework via an engagement with both English-language and French-language secondary material. On the one hand, this would be a step forward in composition studies scholarship, which, as Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue rightly point out, does not regularly feature engagement with non-English sources, and could thus conceivably be reflective of a translanguaging citational politics. On the other hand, it could be reflective of a translanguaging orientation to composition research that represents the reification of a translanguaging “norm” in which Global North epistemology once again prevails.

Returning to Blommaert’s theorization of a “messy new marketplace” might be productive here because his inquiry into what it means for a language resource originally from French to be semiotically mobilized and rescaled in a different geographical context. The complexities of language in the era of globalization are indeed increasingly “messy.” This is akin to Heller’s observation of how it has become increasingly expected to encounter language in unexpected places: “As soon as we start looking closely at real people in real places, we see movement. We see languages turning up in unexpected places, and not turning up where we expect them to be. We also see them taking unexpected forms” (343). Pennycook takes up this issue in order to call into question the criteria by which we delineate differences between the expected and the unexpected: “this is not so much about being light on one’s feet, ready for the new, as it is a question of asking why the unexpected is unexpected” (36). Relevant for our purposes is the opportunity to interrogate what gets categorized and treated as “unexpected” versus “expected,” and more importantly, who gets to decide. I am referring here not only to language resources (French being proposed as a language resource in a new translanguaging “norm”) but also methodological choices. More specifically, if we are to embrace the realities of this “messy new marketplace” of language, I would propose that the priority is not merely adding more languages to the field of secondary material we can draw on (though, to reiterate, I am not opposed to that proposition in principle) but to embrace “messy” research methods. I of course do not mean “messy” in a pejorative sense. Rather, I am referring to the process of following one’s intellectual intuition in the pursuit of new knowledge about language in a manner that is analogous to the ingenious ways in which everyday people draw on language resources to achieve communicative success in globalizing contexts.

One of the most intriguing cases of adopting “messy” research methods is found in Finex Ndhlovu’s article, “Omphile and His Soccer Ball: Colonialism, Methodology, Translanguaging Research.” Ndhlovu describes his experience taking a break from an academic conference in Johannesburg, South Africa and meeting a young boy named Omphile outside the conference venue. He recalls them fluidly moving between words and expressions from isiZulu, Setswana, Sepedi, and English, contrary to the rigid and systematic use of multiple languages being promoted at the conference. Having learned more from this chance encounter outside the conference than in the conference itself, Ndhlovu uses this experience to argue for the importance of being open to research methods that are frequently treated as unscientific, in his case autoethnography. Ndhlovu’s essay lays bare the impact of traditional (Western, colonial, English-only) academic publishing, citation, and linguistic practices on the methodological choices for global writing researchers. To return briefly to the Canagarajah anecdote above, we also need to take seriously the ways in which the review process constrains researchers, not only in terms of language choice but also the expectations and requirements to meet certain traditionally-defined methods, which in turn impact the questions researchers (are allowed to) ask, the methodological frameworks they can draw from, and/or the methods used to conduct research. In other words, by being open to “messy” methods, we are able to invite a more diverse range of voices and perspectives in the process of knowledge production.

In the case of composition studies, the field is already welcoming of a diverse range of methodological approaches, and it is difficult to provide a uniform set of guidelines on what is a “messy” approach to research versus, say, a “neat” one. Further, citational politics (i.e., making decisions about what secondary source material to cite and by extension what *not* to cite) is but one small part of the research process. I should also note that my call to be open to “messy” methods does not mean we should treat with caution or suspicion research that is the result of more conventional or systematic approaches. But I would also argue that conventional methods, approaches, and instruments cannot always capture the complexities of today’s translingual realities. Imagine, for instance, a study that uses surveys with Likert scales to “measure” instructors’ or students’ “attitudes” toward translingual writing. Even from the outset, such a study would invariably compartmentalize language epistemology into rigid categories and the “findings” would likely reify extant possibilities of knowledge about language, reducing the complexities of translingualism to that which can be conceptualized in a survey instrument or via coding schemes. Embracing “messiness,” then, challenges us as researchers to follow our intuition to continually rethink the givens of research and to take risks in order to push the boundaries of thought in language. Everyday users of translingual practice, after all, take risks in the ways

they use language and as a result are able to think and communicate beyond the boundaries of language as such, and we should demand no less from researchers as well.

CONCLUSION: EMBRACING MESSINESS

Composing can frequently be an inherently messy process, and when it comes to translingual composition, things can get even more complicated. Therefore, when it comes to research methods, particularly when the subject of our inquiry is translingualism, it would behoove us to be open to “messy” research methods. The influential 2011 opinion piece in *College English* by Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Joynes Royster, and John Trimbur, catalyzed the translingual turn in composition studies. In it, they emphasize that adopting a translingual orientation to writing does not mean that there are no “errors” or that we should dismiss all “standards” (310-11). Likewise, adopting a translingual orientation to research methods does not mean “anything goes.” In other words, it does not mean accepting anything and everything that is “unexpected.” Rather it simply means being open to that which is unexpected and not unilaterally rejecting it on the basis of its unexpectedness. Indeed, in the same way that it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine what is or is not an unexpected encounter with language nowadays, it will become increasingly “messy” to sift through what is an unexpected research method and an expected one. However, if we are to embrace the premises of translingualism, then we need to embrace “messiness” as the new “norm” but one that is anything but.

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