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Ni de over here, ni de allá: Bilingual Professional Writing Practices on the Mexico/US Borderland¹

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TEACHING WRITING NOW: DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

A virtual symposium hosted by the Texas A&M Department of English throughout the spring of 2021 that featured a series of talks and workshops on the topic of how practitioners can better teach writing now by addressing diversity, inclusion, and social justice in the writing classroom. The event was aimed at bringing together scholars doing research in social justice pedagogies, cultural rhetorics, and composition/professional writing in our rapidly changing media landscapes. Events were free and open to the public.

Teaching Writing at the Border

Delivered Wednesday, January 27, 2021, from 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm.

Introduction

I want to begin by describing my positionality in and orientation to researching writing, rhetoric, and translation on the Mexico/US borderland, specifically on the border of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico and El Paso, Texas, USA. I had the privilege to work at the University of Texas at El Paso from 2016–2019, where I was fortunate to collaborate with bilingual communities and students in the region, while also completely transforming—through the labor and brilliance of the youth, families,

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students, and professionals I met—my orientation to theorizing language and translation. As a language scholar, I firmly believe that borderland language practices, and specifically the people who innovate and navigate these practices, should inform our theories and applications of writing and research more broadly. My goal is to illustrate how language fluidity on the border should further inform technical and professional communication and rhetoric and writing studies research. At the same time, I recognize that my analyses and descriptions of languaging on the border are made through my experiences as a bilingual immigrant from Bolivia who lived, taught, and built community on the Mexico/US border and who continues to invest what I can in the communities that transformed my life and sustain my work. I do not claim to have lived experience as a borderland language practitioner, and, in fact, one of the things I hope to illustrate is that the embodied experiences of borderland languaging are dynamic, constantly changing, and directly influenced by longstanding white supremacist linguistic ideologies that police who and what is categorized as “bilingual.”

Here, I'll share brief excerpts from several community-driven projects conducted alongside community members and students in the borderland city of El Paso, Texas, a large metropolitan city with a population estimated at over 1.5 million people. With thousands of people who cross between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso to attend school, work, and/or to visit family on a daily or weekly basis, the Ciudad Juárez/El Paso border is the largest bilingual, binational work force in the Western Hemisphere. Through grounded stories and examples, I aim to show what bilingualism means on the border and how borderland language practices can and should shape conversations about bilingual technical and professional writing. As I share these examples, I also draw on research about writing program development at Hispanic Serving Institutions, which was recently published in the journal *Programmatic Perspectives* with my collaborators Kendall Leon and Ann Shivers-McNair (2020).

My ultimate argument is that as writing programs (broadly defined) continue working to embrace and practice bilingual and multilingual communication, we should look to the fluid languaging experiences of borderland communities, who consistently teach us that:

- 1) language fluidity and translation is survival,
- 2) language constantly moves, shifts, adapts, and changes, and
- 3) language is always connected to race, power, and positionality.

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Example 1: La Escuelita

To begin, I'd like to introduce you to Alejandra (see Figure 1), a then middle-school student who lived with her family in a housing community in El Paso, and who frequently commuted with her parents to visit family in Ciudad Juárez. Alejandra participated in an after-school program, La Escuelita, which I co-directed alongside my colleagues at UTEP from 2016-2019 (Del Hierro et al., 2019).



Figure 1: *Video of Alejandra Sharing Her Recipe*

In the short Clip captured in Figure 1, Alejandra is making an affinity diagram, a common brainstorming activity in user-experience research. As part of our lessons on culturally sustaining health and nutrition practices, Alejandra is showing us her favorite recipe—a recipe for hard-boiled eggs that she learned from her grandma. To describe how to make her grandma’s egg recipe, Alejandra writes instructions on sticky notes, and then she confidently places the sticky notes on the wall as she describes each step in the recipe. Rather than relying on one single writing system in her recipe, Alejandra uses words in Spanish and English to describe the need to “herbir el agua hasta que este real hot” (or boil water until it’s really hot), to “make sure el huevito gets cooked all the way,” and she also uses images as she draws the egg’s transformation and as she colors arrows to show the progression of steps in this technical tutorial. In short, Alejandra knows exactly how to make this recipe, and she describes each step in detail to her Escuelita family, her audience.

On the surface, Alejandra's technical documentation process, describing the steps of her recipe, echoes the fluid languaging practices that many researchers have documented as prevalent on the Mexico/US border. When describing her recipe, Alejandra is not constrained by the boundaries of standardized English, standardized Spanish, or alphabetic writing systems. Instead, Alejandra moves fluidly across and through these boundaries to convey her ideas. As many scholars in technical communication, rhetoric and composition, and English education argue, bilingual and multilingual communicators like Alejandra communicate outside and through boundaries, not only among alphabetic languages but also among various modalities, tools, and platforms. From discussions of technical communicators as translators who facilitate access across technical tools and documents (Weiss 1997), to the work of scholars like Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva (2003), who push writing scholars to acknowledge the creative communicative practices of "students from the margins" (p. 1), to more recent understandings of writing beyond what Bruce Horner, Cynthia Selfe, and Tim Lockridge (2015) identify as the "Single Language/Single Modality" approach to writing and writing instruction, to groundbreaking work of education scholars like Idalia Nuñez (2019), who shows us how "Madres Mexicanas Hacen La Lucha" by helping their kids language through multimodal approaches, communities of color have historically and contemporarily moved fluidly through boundaries and borders—among standardized languages, digital platforms, and semiotic practices.

Yet, it would be disingenuous of me to simply categorize Alejandra's communicative boundaries as "fluid" or as "moving beyond borders" without also recognizing that linguistic borders, while arbitrary, are strictly policed, and crossing these borders and boundaries, while it may lead to more effective communication, also holds dire consequences, particularly for Mexican, Indigenous, and Chicana communities who continue experiencing violence at the border.

You see, when Alejandra describes her recipe, she does so confidently, with her hands pressing each sticky note firmly as she describes her process to her audience. What you don't see in this short clip is that in order to get to a point where Alejandra felt comfortable sharing her ideas in this way, participants at La Escuelita had spent years building *confianza* (Alvarez, 2017), establishing a relationship where we all understood each other, and where youth ranging from pre-K to high school, parents, and University professors could come together to share our thoughts and ideas beyond boundaries. It is easy to talk about crossing borders on a metaphorical level, without recognizing the violence that borderland communities continue to experience in a very real, tangible way. While Alejandra may speak fluidly in Spanish

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and English with her Escuelita family, she doesn't necessarily feel comfortable languaging this way in school, where she has to consistently prove that her English is "good enough" or "professional enough" for success in US academics.

A long history of research highlights how anti-immigrant violence and xenophobia has positioned borderland residents, and Chicana communities specifically, as not being "from" Mexico nor from the US, *ni de aquí, ni de allá*, and therefore not speaking "proper" Spanish nor "proper" English. While Alejandra speaks Spanish and English because she continues to have close relationships with her Spanish-speaking family in Ciudad Juárez, it's important to note that not all borderland communities have the privilege of being able to cross back and forth between Mexico and the US. Furthermore, for many Chicana community members who were beaten in school for using Spanish, learning and speaking only English was and is upheld as a marker of American assimilation. For many border residents, speaking Spanish is seen as a marker of Mexican identity that has been diminished in the US.

Example 2: The Diabetes Garage

In 2019, in collaboration with the El Paso Diabetes Association and Dr. Jeanie Concha, assistant professor of public health at UTEP, I had the opportunity to conduct focus groups with bilingual Latino men who identify as borderland residents and who live in El Paso. For this project, the research team was trying to develop localized bilingual materials related to diabetes treatment and prevention (see Concha et al.). During a focus group conversation, we asked bilingual Latino men, mostly in their 50s and 60s, to help us translate a brochure about diabetes. In this conversation, the men engaged in dialogue about the use of "formal" Spanish on the brochure. The following are excerpts from the focus group transcripts:

Participant 1: And in the old days they used to say like if you respected, you talk to your older people, like "de usted." And nowadays, they talk, especially people who are bilingual, who got the bilingual thing, they actually use "tu" instead of "usted." It's kind of like old-fashioned, I think.

Participant 2: Well, I mean if you use the "usted," that is the proper, you know, Spanish. But if you use the "tu" [and] um [words like], "checha" instead of "revisa," you know, you're...I think it should be more formal, I mean cause you are not, it is just not the people here in El Paso that you are trying

to reach... it's the people that are actually coming from, you know the Mexican side that are actually already here that are, that were raised with the proper Spanish.

In this particular conversation, focus group participants were discussing the “type” of language that the brochure should include. Although participants were given some background on the project and told that they themselves are a representative target user (bilingual Latino men of varying ages who live in El Paso, Texas) for this brochure and for the broader program, as evidenced in the quoted excerpts, men engaged in a discussion about the use of “formal” versus “informal” terminology, referencing various levels of formality and propriety and their connections to Chicana culture. The discussion between “formal” (i.e., standardized) and “informal” (i.e., fluid/borderland) Spanish was prevalent throughout all of the participatory translation focus groups conducted for this project. For example, participants mentioned that formal Spanish would make the diabetes-related information be taken more seriously or “with respect.” At the same time, however, some participants mentioned that using less formal language, such as using the word “checa” in “checa tus niveles” would make the brochure more accessible to the El Paso audience. As one participant mentioned, “You don’t want to gear this [brochure] to people with Master’s degrees,” but should instead focus on reaching broader audiences.

On the surface, these excerpts illustrate participants’ helpful contributions and the thoroughness of their user feedback; these men were concerned with designing a brochure that would be appealing and usable within their community, as they, too, recognized the need for more diabetes-related interventions and programs in the area. Yet, what these excerpts and the broader conversation also point to are ongoing questions, issues, and consequences related to language fluidity, racial relations, colonialism, and diversity in this borderland region.

During this conversation, participants discussed possible translations of the word “check” in reference to the notion of “checking your blood glucose levels” within diabetes treatment and prevention. At first, the men suggested the word “checa” as a colloquial term frequently used to reference the English term “check” in this borderland region. Although the Castilian-derived translation of “check,” according to the real academia Española on which most “formal” translations are based, may be something like the word “revisa” (closer to the English term, “review”), participants initially suggested the term “checa” as a colloquialism that would appeal to and resonate with local users of the brochure. Participants

mentioned that they use the word “checa” in their homes in reference to “checking” anything ranging from their own car engines to their bank accounts. However, later in the conversation, participants such as participant 2 quoted earlier questioned the suggestion to use the term “checa” in the proposed brochure, wondering if the colloquial term “checa” would be offensive to Spanish speakers who do not speak the “pocho” or informal Spanish found in El Paso. As participant 2 elaborated, “the people who are coming from, you know, the Mexican side” are the individuals who speak “proper Spanish,” and thus those who may be offended or put off by the colloquial term “checa.” Another participant mentioned that the brochure should contain “the proper, proper Spanish,” rather than the Spanish used by “people like me, or my dad” (referring to El Paso residents who speak “pocho” Spanish).

The purpose of this project was to target material specifically for the Chicano men represented in the participatory translation focus groups; however, language relations in this region, and in the US and Mexico more broadly, consistently degrade non-standardized Spanishes in favor of standardized variations rooted in the European Castilian, to the point that border residents themselves may suggest standardized Spanish or standardized English translations, dismissing their own linguistic practices as unprofessional and not credible.

In “Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective,” Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores (2017) “interrogate the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race” to describe what they term “raciolinguistic ideologies” (p. 622). Through this discussion, Rosa and Flores tie the separation of communicative practices into categorical “named” languages (e.g., Spanish, English, French) directly to a broader colonial project. European colonization established binary categorizations between countries, nations, and languages, all as part of the colonial aim to establish and ensure white supremacy (see Milu). Colonization (i.e., colonizers) separated lands into nations, people into racial categories (where white European is superior and all Others are inferior), and languages into static, bounded practices that were either literate/legible or not, all based on a white European standard. For example, as Rosa and Flores continue, “European colonizers described indigenous language practices as animal-like forms of ‘simple communication’ that were incapable of expressing the complex worldviews represented by European languages” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 624). This distinction between “simple” or “animal-like” communication and the “complex” or “sophisticated” language of the European colonizers continued to fuel the dehumanization of racialized subjects through chattel slavery (see Makoni and Pennycook) and exercises extended and deep-rooted influence on what is deemed

“complex” or “sophisticated” versus “lay” or “plain” language today (Jones & Williams, 2017).

Yet, in contemporary professional contexts, non-standardized language is essential to successful technical communication. There are many examples of health campaigns that are geared toward Spanish-speaking men and that all use the term “checa” to remind men to get their annual physicals and keep track of their health. Healthcare practitioners, advertisers, and professional communicators know that in order to convey technical information, technical documentation has to reflect the languaging practices of real people, and as such, this documentation needs to embrace non-standardized language practices. Instead of separating translations into a Spanish side and an English side, contemporary bilingual professional writing practices embrace Spanglishes and borderland fluidity among various Spanishes and Englishes.

Conclusion

As technical and professional communication as a field expands its conceptions of language beyond standardization, it’s clear that we need more professional communicators like Alejandra and her borderland community. It’s also clear that we need educational spaces that sustain borderland language practices and that foster the type of relationality that allows and encourages communicators to use their languages in their own ways and for their own purposes. Like English, Spanish has a long history of upholding white supremacist linguistic ideologies that privilege white European Spanishes above all others. Thus, establishing bilingual programs will mean nothing to social justice efforts if the Spanish we welcome in that bilingualism aligns with whitewashed standardization.

As language researchers continue studying bilingualism in professional spaces, I hope we can continue to imagine together. Imagine educational journeys for students like Alejandra that allow her languages to shine and that welcome her whole person into writing classrooms. Imagine conversations about bilingualism that centralize, rather than erase, conversations about race and colonialism. Imagine spaces where crossing borders is not a metaphor, but rather an intentional journey supported and embraced in all our communities. Imagine spaces where language diversity can be welcomed without centering whiteness and standardization.

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Ni de over here, ni de allá

About the Author

Laura Gonzales is an assistant professor of Digital Writing and Cultural Rhetorics in the Department of English at the University of Florida. Her research focuses on language diversity, community engagement, and technology design. She is the author of *Sites of Translation: What Multilinguals Can Teach Us About Digital Writing and Rhetoric* (University of Michigan Press, 2018), which won the 2020 CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award and the 2016 Digital Rhetoric Collaborative Book Prize.

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