



# The transformative limits of translanguaging

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## ABSTRACT

The implementation of translanguaging at school is often seen to have transformative capacities: it will release bilingual subjectivities, and change unequal social structures. In this paper I argue that translanguaging is likely to be less transformative and socially critical than is suggested, because translanguaging research has more in common with the monolingual authorities it criticizes than it may seem, because it trades on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted, and because translanguaging, in some of its representations, is becoming a dominating rather than a liberating force. This does not detract from the value of translanguaging research, nor from the importance of reconciling schools with linguistic diversity. But it may imply arguing this transformation from a different tack.

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## 1. Introduction

Translanguaging has in recent years become a popular scientific concept in socio- and applied linguistics. What was only known in Welsh until less than 20 years ago is now a household name in international conferences, symposia and summer schools, and the central topic of highly cited publications (Canagarajah, 2013; Creese and Blackledge, 2010; García, 2009; García and Wei, 2014; Hornberger and Link, 2012; Li Wei, 2011). If hits on google mean anything, translanguaging today has some 300.000 of these (September 2017), which is less than the score for superdiversity (370.000) or code-switching (500.000); but it quite beats the numbers of rivalling terms like codemeshing (50.000), metrolingualism (43.000), or poly-languaging (a meagre 3.500). Popular new concepts, however, run the risk of 'discursive drift' (Cameron, 1995, p. 127):

The media can spread [...] neologisms more widely and more quickly than either face-to-face communication or elite forms of writing, but the context they provide is insufficient to guarantee an exact transfer of meaning: they do not usually engage in the tedious definition of terms one finds in scholarly journals [...] People may thus arrive at all kinds of inferences about the meaning of a new term they encounter in the media, and as they start to use it in other contexts themselves, it begins to drift away from its earlier (and usually narrower) sense. In the process, specialist terms can lose their precision, acquire connotations they did not have before, and start to overlap with other terms from which they were once distinguished.

Cameron was referring at the time to how a notion like gender was becoming a polite synonym for biological sex, although it had been coined precisely in contrast with sex to denote a social identity. But while the media surely have a part in this process, there is little doubt that scholarly circles too can cause discursive drift. Terms like discourse, ideology, and identity have inspired countless researchers to pursue new scientific horizons, in the process propelling these terms to world-fame. Yet the allure and uptake of these terms have at the same time inflated their meaning, to the point that they are now often

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found elusive if not, as Brubaker and Cooper say about identity, ‘hopelessly [...] ambiguous’ Brubaker and Cooper (2000, p. 6). That some scholars have already felt it necessary to ‘clarify translanguaging’ (Otheguy et al., 2015) seems to suggest that this concept, too, is enduring discursive drift. This may be less the result of its uptake by laypeople than the outcome of its continuous redefinition and extension by translanguaging specialists themselves in their consecutive publications. To be sure, translanguaging today can refer to all speakers’ innate linguistic instinct, to bilinguals’ spontaneous language use, to everyday cognitive processes, to a bilingual pedagogy, and to a theory of language and education. And because applying translanguaging at school in some of these meanings contravenes this institution’s usually monolingual character, it also names transformative, socially critical processes: ‘as new configurations of language practices and education are generated, old understandings and structures are released, thus transforming not only subjectivities, but also cognitive and social structures’ (García and Wei, 2014, p. 3).

In this paper I argue not only that this profusion of meaning gives reason for concern, but that translanguaging is likely to be less transformative and critical than is often suggested. The main reasons for this are that translanguaging scholars share a number of convictions with the monolingual authorities they criticize, that their transformative claims trade on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted, and that translanguaging, at least in some of its representations, is becoming a dominating rather than a liberating force.

In making this argument, it is not my intention to give the final verdict on translanguaging research. This would be unfair given the diversity of work under this banner, as well as difficult to realise here – the literature on translanguaging already is so expansive that a comprehensive account would leave little room for critical appraisal. I have chosen instead to concentrate on work by widely acclaimed scholars as Ofelia García, Li Wei and their collaborators. One reason for this is that their work on translanguaging is most visible, highly influential, awarded by colleagues, and much-quoted, but at the same time contains a number of assumptions that I fear are harmful to the cause I share with them, that is, advocating that schools recognize linguistic diversity. These assumptions are less prominent in the work of other translanguaging scholars, whom I will largely disregard here for rhetorical purposes, and for reasons of space. A second motive for focusing on this subset of scholars is that problems I discuss are not specific to their approach of translanguaging, but range beyond to much other scholarship that takes a critical stance towards schools’ monolingualism. My comments on a particular strand of research may thus be useful to a broader audience. In what follows I first address how the narrow sense of translanguaging was reconfigured into a terminological house with many rooms. I then situate transformative claims in translanguaging research in an educational and cultural ideology, before explaining why these claims have to be reconsidered and contemplating possible alternatives.

## 2. Extending translanguaging

Translanguaging was first coined in Welsh, as *trawsieithu*, to refer to a pedagogy that encouraged the use of two languages (Welsh and English), mainly to promote the acquisition of Welsh in the idea that this would produce balanced bilinguals (Williams, 1994). The initial impulse for the eventual world-fame of this local concept was provided by its translation into English (Baker, 2001) and its subsequent uptake in the literature on dual language and literacy learning. But the major incentive for its greater recognition was the generalization of its meaning ‘from school to street, from pedagogical practices to everyday cognitive processing, from classroom lessons to all contexts of a bilingual’s life’ (Lewis et al., 2012, p. 647), particularly through Ofelia García’s prolific work, later in collaboration with Li Wei, and through its dissemination in Colin Baker’s seminal publications. Two main inspirations stand out for this extension: socio- and psycholinguistic insights about language, and a political project of transformation.

The sociolinguistic insight is that actual language use and people’s perception of it do not always correspond with the distinct (national) languages we conventionally identify (e.g. ‘French’) and that these labels hide significant variation between different idiolects. Rather than speaking French, sociolinguists suggest that speakers engage, first and foremost, in ‘languageing’, that is, combine sets of linguistic resources that may, or may not, agree with canonically recognized languages, codes or styles, and that these resources are deployed alongside other semiotic resources (see, for example, Blommaert and Backus, 2011; Jørgensen, 2008). ‘Languageing’ has also been used in psycholinguistics and language acquisition research to refer to ‘the dynamic, never ending process of using language to make meaning’ (Swain, 2006) and to the ways in which people make sense, articulate their thoughts, and gain knowledge (Becker, 1988; Li Wei, 2011). These insights have inspired the scholars at issue here to propose ‘translanguaging’, rather than ‘languageing’, as a term for speakers’ natural linguistic instinct or cognitive capacity, and for their observable practices.

Thus García and Li Wei propose that ‘[h]uman beings have a natural translanguaging instinct’ (2014, p. 32). This is ‘an innate capacity to draw on as many different cognitive and semiotic resources as available to them to interpret meaning intentions and to design actions accordingly’ (Li Wei, 2016, p. 541). For Otheguy, García, and Reid, translanguaging refers to the mental or psychological sense [of language which] encompasses the billions of individual linguistic competences of speakers the world over, irrespective of whether we call them monolingual or multilingual (2015, p. 286). In a Chomskyan sense, translanguaging here involves a universal competence, one that includes so-called monolinguals.

Translanguaging equally touches upon the idea of performance, though, excluding monolinguals and retaining the conventional identity of the ‘bilingual’. Thus translanguaging involves ‘the multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds’ (García and Wei, 2014, p. 65); ‘the flexible use of linguistic resources by bilinguals in order to make sense of their world’ (García et al., 2015, p. 200); the ‘fluid language practices of bilinguals’ (García and Lin, 2016, p. 117); and ‘the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of

what are described as autonomous languages' (García, 2009, p. 141). A broader definition, including 'monolinguals', suggests that translanguaging involves 'the deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for the watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named [...] languages' (Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 281). These conceptions of translanguaging have invited García and Li Wei to name their general approach or theory 'translanguaging':

Translanguaging is an approach to the use of language, bilingualism and the education of bilinguals that considers the language practices of bilinguals not as two autonomous language systems as has been traditionally the case, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been societally constructed as belonging to two separate languages (2014, p. 2).

A second inspiration for the redesign of an erstwhile language-pedagogical notion is a political project of transformation, at a personal and societal level, through recognizing linguistic diversity at school. This transformation is held to be a causal effect of translanguaging (whether understood as performance or pedagogy) as well as a desired effect or moral value. The predicted causal effects are generally that translanguaging will change pupils' subjectivities, cognitive structures, and the social structures around them. So, translanguaging is suggested to be a 'transformative pedagogy capable of calling forth bilingual subjectivities' (García and Wei, 2014, p. 92); it 'gives back the voice that had been taken away by ideologies of monoglot standards' (García and Wei, 2014, p. 105); it 'decolonize[s] the dominant intellectual knowledge' (García and Leiva, 2014, p. 211; Flores and García, 2013); and it 'creates changes in interactive cognitive and social structures' (García and Wei, 2014, p. 42), besides 'contest[ing] and transcend[ing] all scripts of the larger society' (2014, p. 132). The production of bilingual subjectivities, and the transformation of cognitive and social structures, are seen to be causally connected moreover, in that bilingual subjectivities are expected to lead to enhanced well-being and the school success required for increasing one's chances of social mobility. This is clear from the attribution of school failure to schools' inability to validate such bilingual subjectivities:

[L]anguage minoritized children using home language practices in schools have been, and continue to be, severely punished [...] Today, the punishment is not corporal [anymore], but relies on instruction and assessments that follow monolingual language standards, ensuring that bilingual students get lower grades, are made to feel inadequate, and fail in schools. [...] Clearly the educational consequences of the sociopolitical inability to authenticate a multilingual and heteroglossic reality is responsible for educational failure of many language minorities around the world (García and Wei, 2014, p. 55–56, my emphasis)

Transformation is also seen to be a desired effect, a matter of social justice (understood as a matter of recognition rather than economic redistribution). In this light it is argued that 'translanguaging connects to the linguistic human rights agenda' (García and Wei, 2014, p. 116), or that 'by exposing alternative histories, representations and knowledge, translanguaging has the potential to crack the "standard language bubble" in education that continues to ostracize many bilingual students' (García and Wei, 2014, p. 115). In one blog post Flores (2014) is concerned that translanguaging, while its popularity spreads, is losing its political edge and advises that '[t]ranslanguaging research should not objectively describe the language practices of language-minoritized communities but rather should attempt to analyze the ways that these language practices are marginalized by the larger society'.

In sum, translanguaging can apply to an innate instinct that includes monolinguals; to the performance of fluid language use that mostly pertains to bilinguals; to a bilingual pedagogy; to a theory or approach of language; and to a process of personal and social transformation. By any standard this is a lot for one term. And if Terry Eagleton (1994, p. 11) was right to caution that '[a]ny term which tries to cover too much threatens to cancel all the way through and end up signifying nothing', this polysemy itself deserves a discussion.

While this does not represent the main focus in this paper, it is relevant to point out that not all translanguaging scholars commit to each of these meanings. Williams' original sense of translanguaging was part of minority language revitalization efforts that are not necessarily reconcilable (see below) with García and Li Wei's advocacy of fluid language use at school *per se*. That said, using the same term for explanatory concepts and observable facts, as is the case in translanguaging's extended sense, invites statements to the effect that 'the occurrence of translanguaging (fluid language use) is triggered by translanguaging (the pedagogy) and can be explained as an instance of translanguaging (speakers' natural instinct)'. This is not entirely pointless, but it is confusing. It is equally inconvenient, unless precision is not a priority, that translanguaging as an explanatory concept (the instinct) includes monolingual speakers but descriptively, as a label for fluid language use, excludes them. Only the idea of translanguaging as a practice, moreover, seems to be a sensible target for social justice, given that this is not usually demanded for natural capacities (the ability to think, speak, act) but for specific manifestations of them (particular opinions, speech practices, customs). The more we define translanguaging as a natural instinct, the more this may undermine demands that it be recognized as a practice (why insist on recognizing what you already have, critics will ask). So, there may be limits to the chameleonic capacity of translanguaging. And one has to ask why the same term is applied to such disparate meanings, what its added value is, compared to other terms, and to what extent it answers to an entrepreneurial academic climate that looks benign on words that sell (cf. Pavlenko, 2018).

The main focus in what follows, however, is on the transformative claims in translanguaging research. One reason for this is that these claims are quite ambitious. Translanguaging (as pedagogy and practice) is suggested to result in new subjectivities, to give back voice, transform cognitive structures, raise well-being and attainment levels, and eventually to transform an unequal society into a more just world. This is expecting a lot from the introduction of specific linguistic

practices at school, and it is a matter of intellectual honesty to inquire if we can rely on the predicted effects. All the more because, second, these effects at least in part legitimize translanguaging's social justice agenda. This agenda is reasonable, and it is one I share. But if the predicted effects fail to occur or prove to be overstated, there is a risk that this agenda gets discredited as unrealistic, naïve, or mistaken. A third reason is that these transformative claims have a self-evident quality, as if schools obviously must be places for releasing subjectivities, ensuring well-being and decolonizing society, and that translanguaging is the only route to realizing this. Indeed, this is the impression given by statements that '[a] translanguaging theory in education views the incorporation of students' full linguistic repertoire as simply the only way to go about developing language practices in school, as well as to educate' (García and Wei, 2014, p. 74). Such statements ignore that even a fully translanguaged school will probably require students to renounce certain parts of their linguistic repertoire (sexist and racist language, youth slang, gaming lingo) and expand it with new skills (academic writing, for example). Such a school will control (colonize?) pupils' linguistic output, form rather than simply release their subjectivities, and not all pupils may like this. If so, the question is where such There Is No Alternative statements come from and what other options can be imagined.

It may be objected, of course, that in concentrating on transformative claims I am setting up a straw man argument, evoking and then criticizing strong causality relations where only weak ones are maintained. Indeed, saying that translanguaging is *capable* of calling forth bilingual subjectivities is not exactly defending the view that it *will* do so. Yet the frequency with which the transformative potential of translanguaging is emphasized in the work at issue here, and the lack of qualifying statements and caveats, does imply a certain confidence that particular effects can be counted upon; others have noticed the centrality of transformation in that work, too (Creese and Blackledge, 2015, p. 26). Arguing that only weak causal effects are proposed moreover ignores the theoretical underpinnings of such propositions in an educational and cultural philosophy where transformation is a fundamental rather than accidental outcome of pedagogical intervention and the cultivation of hybridity, respectively. I shall now briefly turn to both philosophies before addressing why the claims that are inspired by them need to be reconsidered.

### 3. Theoretical context for transformative claims

The accent on transformation in translanguaging research is clearly indebted to what is known as critical pedagogy, an educational philosophy inspired by the work of Paolo Freire (1970; also see McLaren, 2003). One explicit sign of this appears when García and Li Wei write that '[b]ilingual education programs must help students become critically conscious in a Freirean sense and develop the tools to engage with the relationship between language and power so as to transform their future possibilities' (2014, p. 74). By and large, critical pedagogy is an optimistic, independently formed (Burawoy, 2012) response to the neo-marxist analysis that schools do not transform society – in spite of social-democratic ('old' marxist) claims that they serve to emancipate all pupils – because they conceal their own purpose, which is to reproduce existing relationships of inequality through its subject matter and modes of transmission (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Moore, 2007). This is said to happen through treating pupils as obedient receptors of established knowledge that intrinsically 'confers on the privileged the supreme privilege of not seeing themselves as privileged' and 'convince[s] the disinherited that they owe their scholastic and social destiny to their lack of gifts or merits' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 210; cited in Burawoy, 2012, p. 103). In Freirean terms, 'the oppressed [...] adopt an attitude of 'adhesion' to the oppressor' (Freire, 1970, p. 45, in Burawoy, 2012, p. 110), so that 'the invaded come to see their reality with the outlook of the invaders' (1970, p. 153, in Burawoy, 2012, p. 110).

Bourdieu and Passeron were skeptical of the school's potential to change society, believing that any well-intentioned change at school would be quickly re-infected by the unequal structures around it. Critical pedagogues have been much more optimistic about this on the condition that, first, curricula and teaching practices are stripped of stereotypes, and, second, that alternative, pupil-centered pedagogies are developed that start from dialogue rather than monologue, from a critical look on established truths, and from pupils' own experiences, inspired by Rousseauian ideas of natural education and individual creativity, so that they can become 'beings for themselves' rather than 'beings for others' (Freire, 1970, p. 74) who are constrained by social categories they may not see as their own (Moore, 2007, p. 6).

The sociological assumption behind this is that making the school a social frontline, a site of resistance and transformation, constitutes a first step in changing society at large. In social-psychological terms, critical pedagogy assumes that to the extent that the curriculum, the teaching-learning process, or the teachers are biased, this unequivocally impacts on pupils' identity formation, self-image and confidence. The reasoning here is that stereotypes will be internalized, produce a negative self-image or fractured self, and then cause low attainment levels (Jones and Moore, 1992; Moore, 2007). Freire argued in this regard that, because pupils have internalized a 'false' self (their oppressor's consciousness), education needs to help pupils to set free their 'true' self, to speak with their own voice, and become 'whole' rather than 'divided' (Freire, 1970, p. 48). These assumptions elucidate the emphasis in García and Li Wei's work on identity recognition, giving back voice, using the totality rather than a fraction of the linguistic repertoire, and occasional references to 'self-awareness and self-healing' (2014, p. 133) as relevant goals for translanguaging in class. So, transformation in critical pedagogy is a central objective, not a mere by-product of pedagogical intervention, and this also holds for a second philosophy that motivates transformative claims.

Translanguaging research is much inspired too by representations of hybridity that are integral to the work of post-colonial scholars like Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, particularly the notion of the 'third space', which is seen as the location of new meanings and representations. As Bhabha suggests:

hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom [...] the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (Bhabha in Rutherford, 1990, p. 211).

The third space notion is part of a move that exposes predominant narratives about pure cultures as essentializing constructions, and that reworks a former negative category (the hybrid) into a ‘stick with which to beat the essentialisms of “pure” cultures’ (Ahmad, 2001, p. 74, in Lorente and Tupas, 2014, p. 68). This is done by positing that all cultures are in a state of flux – they are all fundamentally hybrid – and by presenting the hybrid not as a pale imitation of either of its purer ancestors, but as the breeding place for something new that is more than the sum of its parts, something that is ‘interruptive, interrogative and enunciative’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 103). The hybrid, in other words, is a transformative place that symbolizes strength rather than weakness.

Translanguaging scholars have appropriated this idea in many guises. Flores and García (2013) propose the notion ‘linguistic third space’; García et al. (2015) the ‘in between space’; Li Wei (2011) the ‘translanguaging space’; and García and Wei (2014) the ‘trans-space’. Each time the idea is that this space results from the occurrence of fluid language use, and that this subsequently interrupts or interrogates established language models. Flores and García suggest that the linguistic third space ‘transcend[s] current hegemonic language ideologies’ (2013, p. 244); for Li Wei, the act of translanguaging is ‘transformative in nature; it creates a social space for the multilingual language user [...] where different identities, values and practices [do not] simply co-exist, but combine together to generate new identities, values and practices’ (2011, p. 1223).

If purity is a fiction, as Bhabha argues, the logical conclusion is though that all places must be hybrid and thus somehow new or transformative, and this begs the question how much the idea of a third space requires, and so reproduces, the existence of purer places that can be creatively mixed and recognized as genuinely interruptive. In this spirit I wish to raise a couple of other issues relative to the transformative potential of translanguaging, viz., that translanguaging scholars have more in common with the authorities they criticize than it may seem; that their transformative claims trade on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted, and that translanguaging in some of its representations becomes a constraining force that marginalizes, if not silences, particular voices.

#### 4. Some limits to transformative claims in translanguaging

##### 4.1. Sharing convictions with authorities

While translanguaging discourse is peppered with words like transformation and newness, it is important to underline that it shares and reproduces a number of convictions with the monolingual authorities it criticizes. For one thing, authorities and translanguaging scholars are generally agreed that language is key for pupils’ success at school and for reducing social inequality – it is only the *type* of language they disagree over. Authorities see standard language competence as crucial to this, whereas translanguaging scholars argue that allowing pupils to use their home varieties or encouraging fluid language in class offers a more promising, effective path. Both parties in so doing sell their ends as a means: it is not a coincidence that authorities’ preferred means correspond with their wish that citizens speak a standard national variety to symbolize the nation’s identity, modernity and cohesion, and that those preferred by translanguaging scholars represent their idea of what society, in terms of language, should look like. But this is not a harmless rhetorical strategy (albeit one I have at times also reverted to). It hides that the issue of the debate is not merely technological, a matter of effectiveness, but also ideological; it reduces, in this ostensible debate about effective means, school success and social inequality to a linguistic quintessence; and this in its turn generates inflated expectations about the effects of language learning. Such expectations, when maintained by policymakers, have already been frequently denounced by linguists as ‘not working’, on the basis of their evidence, and this is informative and necessary. Yet an evidence-based discourse *only* focuses on means (Biesta, 2007) and this ultimately damages the case for linguistic diversity at school: the more decisions about language at school are advised by ‘what works’, the less legitimate it becomes to ask what language we want. When policymakers commission research to inquire if home language teaching or multilingual learning ‘works’ (for example, raises attainment levels), and subsequently decide to end such provision when the evidence is less than convincing (as has been the case in the Netherlands, cf. de Ruiter and Spotti, 2012), an evidence-based strategy complicates the argument that particular means may also be desirable in light of social values, not just effective.

In focusing on linguistic means authorities and translanguaging scholars moreover endorse the classic view of education as a social credentialing system that ideally works fairly to distinguish optimal from sub-optimal learners, and that needs to be made more effective in case it does not. The assumption is that with the right linguistic resources used and learned, the school fairly determines our place in society. Any transformation from a translanguaging point of view then at most resides in achieving a different composition of the unequal ‘slots’ in the existing social hierarchy, in making sure that new winners replace, or join, old winners – but winners always require losers (cf. Varenne and McDermott, 1999).

Both parties are also convinced that a discourse of discipline is conducive to making teachers implement the preferred behaviour. This is not surprising for authorities, who have had no qualms about formulating their expectations in the form of identity profiles, quality standards and other policy requirements that constrain teachers’ autonomy and force them to become ‘real’ professionals concerned with demonstrating their excellence (Masschelein and Simons,

2013). Yet translanguaging scholars see little harm either in demanding that pre-university teachers adapt to their project and in holding them morally accountable for their exclusive commitment to this, with little consideration for the other expectations (from pupils, colleagues, heads of school, parents) they must observe that complicate their sole dedication to each of these. Like authorities, translanguaging scholars see teachers' partial response to their calls as symptomatic of insufficient willingness or awareness, and constrain the scope of teachers' autonomy by drawing up an ideal profile:

All teachers in the 21st century need to be prepared to be bilingual teachers [...] that is, they need to see themselves as building on and developing the students' additional languages while educating them [...] Teachers need, in other words, to be aware of language diversity and to see their students as people, not just numbers [...] [they] need to develop a critical sociopolitical consciousness about the linguistic diversity of the children [...] Teachers then need to act on all this information [...] (García and Wei, 2014, p. 122–123)

Outside translanguaging research, Alim and Paris (2015, p. 81) similarly insist that '[t]eachers, students, all of us, have a choice to either uphold or disrupt that [monolingual] hegemony', but there is little doubt over which choice they would like to see all of us making. Caught between now two types of governmentality (engendered by authorities and linguists), it takes little imagination to see that teachers may find an approach that promises to 'contest and transcend all scripts of the larger society' pretty evenly matched, in terms of its constraining impact, with the script it aims to replace. Authorities and linguists, Masschelein and Simons would contend, in this way 'tame the school' more than anything else, and in making sure that teachers serve a predetermined ideal, 'the young generation is [...] deprived of the opportunity to actually become a new generation. Instead, they become (at most) performers of the renewal imagined by [the generation of] their parents' (2013, p. 92).

One could argue, of course, that some type of control is inevitable in a state-governed education system, and that expecting teachers to welcome linguistic diversity in class is more in tune with our democratic values than what we have now; any hardships that come with this, and the costly efforts to resolve or attenuate them, are the price to pay for pursuing a just cause. I believe there is much value in this argument. But it overlooks that as university academics, our own teaching, writing and presenting is a monolingual affair, and that inclusiveness is only partially reconcilable with pursuing specific purposes: employing an academic register, for example, prioritizes and so hierarchizes linguistic resources along standards of suitability; this would not be different with a translanguaging academic register. It furthermore ignores that linguistic uniformity can have democratic credentials too, which is why even translanguaging scholars, as I shall now explain, invest in monolingualism.

To be sure, a final shared conviction between translanguaging scholars and authorities is that they both find monolingual practices important. García and Li Wei (2014, p. 71–72) for instance point out that 'students need practice and engagement in translanguaging, as much as they need practice of standard features used for academic purposes'. García and Lin (2016, p. 127) likewise suggest that 'bilingual education must develop bilingual students' ability to use language according to the rules and regulations that have been socially constructed for that particular language'. Such quotes are reasonable and they illustrate these scholars' insight into how language is valorized outside school. But they are also diametrically opposed to their political agenda (interrupting monolingualism), and risk suggesting that while translanguaging practices are valuable and pupil-friendly, they are in the end less important than pupils' ability in socially valued or academic registers. This is a familiar problem for teachers who favour linguistic diversity: how do you valorize pupils' linguistic diversity without losing sight of socially valued, monolingual, registers? Or, inversely, how do you make pupils learn a collectively valued register without implying that their individual linguistic skills are less important? To resolve this teachers sometimes resort to makeshift strategies, promoting translanguaging during group-work, for example, but frowning upon its occurrence in other contexts (in writing, in higher education) (Martínez et al., 2015); other teachers explicitly insist on a monolingual policy but in practice recognize and even use pupils' home varieties (Jaspers, 2015).

Rather than seeing such behaviour as resulting from a lack of awareness or an attitude problem, it may be more useful to see it as symptomatic of negotiating a *single, dilemmatic* ideology. As Billig et al. (1988) argue, the widespread, common-sense ideology of liberal Enlightenment is inherently dilemmatic in that it valorizes opposing themes – authority and equality, teaching and learning, the collective and the individual – leading to everyday problems that require practical compromises through discursive work. Although Billig et al. do not topicalize language, I suggest that this domain is equally dilemmatic, and that teachers (in Western schools) are not faced with a choice between two unrelated ideologies (monolingualism versus translanguaging) but have to navigate a single ideology that values the opposing themes of transparent communication and emancipation through a collective standard variety on the one hand, and respect for individual difference, freedom of expression and equality (of languages, among other things) on the other. The social value of both themes complicates a radical choice between each of these, and this is the reason why teachers often improvise to attend to both contrary poles, why even translanguaging scholars valorize monolingual registers, and why authorities have tolerated forms of multilingualism in the past, however small-scale or transitory, and are now quick to invest in an elite, executive type of it. From this perspective, authorities and translanguaging scholars share 'the same universe of discourse' (Billig et al., 1988, p. 45), the same ideological deep structure, and insist on opposite positions in a debate that they so reproduce rather than transform.

#### 4.2. Empirical doubts over causal relations

Questions can be asked too in relation to the causal effects that are presupposed in transformative claims. Some educational anthropologists, for example, have found evidence of negative attitudes towards pupils' linguistic backgrounds *and* of these same pupils' success at school, disproving the idea that stereotypes directly lead to a negative self-image and then to low achievement (D'Amato, 1987; Erickson, 1987; Gibson, 1987; Ogbu, 1978; cf. also Rampton, 2006, p. 271–276). This does not excuse the negative attitudes, neither does it exclude that stereotyping may contribute to school failure. But it indicates that stereotyping is not straightforwardly internalized, and that all classrooms must be approached as complex interactive settings where, rather than simply accepting what is offered, pupils always negotiate what is put on the table (curricula, teaching styles, teachers) and develop different strategies depending on their short- and long-term ambitions, the classroom climate, and local socio-economic conditions (D'Amato, 1987; Erickson, 1987; Jones and Moore, 1992).

Other, sociolinguistic, evidence indicates that translanguaging may cause a *decrease* in well-being, and that pupils may not find it liberating at all. Charalambous et al. (2016) reveal how a teacher's attempt to introduce Turkish, the home variety of pupils with Bulgarian backgrounds, in a primary school class in Greek Cyprus, was met with resistance, and silence, by the pupils for whom it was intended. Although the teacher's effort was meant to promote mutual understanding, to valorize linguistic hybridity, and to give voice to pupils' 'hidden' linguistic identities, pupils feared that 'speaking Turkish' could be taken as 'being Turkish', still a problematic identity in Greek Cyprus despite the ample peace-building efforts. The authors conclude that in some societies, 'discourses of conflict create unfavourable ecologies for hybrid linguistic practices' (2016, p. 327).

Still other sociolinguistic evidence reports on a four year experiment with 'functional multilingual learning' (Sierens and Van Avermaet, 2014) in a primary school in Ghent (Belgium) (Ramaut et al., 2013). In this experiment pupils were encouraged to use their home variety in class, alongside Dutch, for learning, peer-teaching, and informal interaction, often leading to fluid language use. Pupils with Turkish backgrounds also received supplementary Turkish language teaching, in the idea that this would foster cross-linguistic transfer and raise their level in Dutch. While the experiment was set up deliberately to prove the impact on pupils' learning of allowing linguistic diversity in class and providing additional home language teaching, the outcome was less than expected: learning outcomes had not gone up, and Turkish speaking pupils had not significantly progressed in Dutch. The main finding was that all participants had more positive attitudes towards multilingualism than before, and that pupils were credited as feeling better, which at the same time illustrated that attitudes and positive feelings had had no effect on attainment levels. Naturally, this does not invalidate that encouraging linguistic diversity in class, or providing supplementary language teaching, impacts on learning outcomes and language skills. But it demonstrates that such effects, even when pursued with determination, may sometimes take long to appear, if they appear at all.

A range of sociologists, moreover, question the idea that interventions at school can transform society in any significant way. They point out that while there have been huge educational reforms in Western democracies, many of them in the spirit that democratizing education would redefine social opportunities, these have not led to a substantial change in terms of social inequality (Freeman-Moir and Scott, 2003; Moore, 2007; cf. also Marsh, 2011). As Reay comments, '[t]he irony is that the rhetoric of social mobility and equal opportunities within education has increased in volume and intensity as both have become less possible in practice' (2010, p. 399). One explanation for this is that educational expansion invites credential inflation so that successive generations need to invest in more (expensive, exclusive, longer, further away) education to distinguish themselves from others, an option that is not available to every one of us (Moore, 2007). From this it does not follow that it is impossible or pointless to suppress stereotyping and reduce inequalities at school, on the contrary. But chances are slim that these interventions have an automatic effect on social inequality and stereotyping *outside* school. Neither does it follow that schools have no impact at all on individual trajectories of social mobility, but this is a contingent, rather than guaranteed result (Moore, 2007, p. 161–178).

The list of studies reported above is selective – others could be put forward to claim that fluid language use in class did have a beneficial impact on well-being or attainment levels. The point however is not to deny the possibility of such effects, but to argue that such causality cannot be taken for granted because the effect of introducing particular linguistic resources in class always needs to be considered against the background of continuing inequalities, predominant discourses, local circumstances, and personal considerations. Unless we operate on a deterministic ontology, evidence of 'what worked' never guarantees 'what works or will work' (Biesta, 2007, p. 18). We would be wise therefore not to presume that the mere occurrence or introduction of fluid language use will be beneficial, nor to promise that it will transform *more* than the actual language use in class.

#### 4.3. Translanguaging as a dominating force

A final issue I want to attend to is that translanguaging, in spite of its liberating reputation, can equally become a dominating force, a moral imperative that disqualifies other concerns with language as beyond the pale. This is most visible in the way that concerns with minority language maintenance are approached. Many minority language activists are worried that the promotion of fluid language practices will threaten their efforts (see, for example, Cenoz and Gorter, 2017). This concern is heard by translanguaging scholars. García for instance argues:

While it is important to put the minority language alongside the majority language, thus ensuring for it a place in powerful domains, it is important to preserve a space, although not a rigid or static place, in which the minority language does not compete with the majority language. (2009, p. 301; cited in García and Wei, 2014, p. 74)

This is generous, given that translanguaging scholars criticize language separation. But the condition that it must not be a 'rigid or static place' already intimates that this generosity may not be all it seems, and this is clear if we continue the argument following the quote:

But within those separate spaces, schools must also construct translanguaging spaces where [...] children are given agency to act linguistically by being both *creative* and *critical*, and where teachers encourage those actions. (García and Wei, 2014, p. 74)

The generosity here turns out to come with strings attached, since in their promised safe space minority language activists are again supposed to accept the very conditions that they were attempting to avoid. García and Lin similarly concede that '[m]inoritized languages must be protected and developed if that is the wish of people' but then add that 'it is important to understand that the linguistic features that make up that minoritized language cannot be totally isolated from others because they are generally part of the linguistic competence of bilinguals. Bilingual education cannot maintain minoritized languages as if they were autonomous museum pieces' (2016, p. 128; for a similar argument, see Otheguy et al., 2015, p. 283 and p. 299). Is it a mere coincidence that the tone of phrase used here resembles the one often used towards linguistic purists? Portrayed as pursuing a naïve ideal, purists' concerns are often brushed aside as irrational, uninformed about the natural, fluid course of language (Absillis and Jaspers, 2016), but such rebuffs conveniently overlook the value judgments in *all* language use and naturalize a specific concern (a non-purist one) with language as the only sensible perspective (Cameron, 1995). In presenting minority language concerns in similar terms, translanguaging too seems to emerge as the only rational, ideology-free option, and this is one way in which it can become a dominating force.

This imperious character solidifies as the result of a familiar dynamics. Historically, standard varieties have been promoted by, first, severing them from any ties with specific places or groups – by presenting them as neutral or colourless – and, second, by associating these now 'neutral' varieties with the pursuit of a range of desirable, 'modern', qualities like emancipation, autonomy, civilization, and knowledge. This is what Bauman and Briggs (2003) call the dynamics of purification and hybridization, and they describe how the upshot of such washing and colouring was that specific 'pure' linguistic practices were reframed as universally valid and available to everyone who wished to pursue their autonomy and emancipation – to the detriment of non-standard, 'impure' linguistic practices which were identified as an important obstacle to reaching these goals. If this is the typical sales pitch for standard varieties, its echo can be heard in the way that translanguaging (viz., fluid language use) is severed from all ties to a specific (bilingual) group by presenting it as a universal, innate capacity; and, again comparable to standard varieties, in the way that this fluid language use is steadily associated with the pursuit of now widely sanctioned 'postmodern' values like being disruptive, critical, creative, agentive, and in tune with a globalized world (cf. García and Wei, 2014, p. 9) – now to the detriment of non-hybrid linguistic practices that, in contrast, offer a first-class ticket to a rigid, static, hopelessly outdated identity.

This is not to support linguistic purism against translanguaging, but to point out that both purism and hybridity are socially valued, and that neither is immune for being presented as the only reasonable choice. In both cases this can make conceptions of language feed into a truth regime that allows particular 'good' subjectivities but also identifies and disallows 'bad' ones, that is, people who fail to live up to contingent ideas of what a sensible, socially attractive person is, with all the consequences this can entail. This is a risk that promoters of translanguaging may have to take much more seriously than they have been doing.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Ofelia García, Li Wei, and their collaborators have outstandingly demonstrated that teachers can make pupils' linguistic resources a meaningful and pedagogically exciting part of classroom life. They convincingly show that it is possible to introduce and teach through linguistic diversity. Such reports are indispensable in a broader discussion over language use at school. They are highly instructive, and they deserve to be put into the spotlights.

Yet despite these significant efforts and the enthusiasm they generate, I believe there is reason to be critical of some of the claims that are maintained in translanguaging research, and beyond this in much other work that is critical of schools' monolingualism. I am concerned that we are overstepping our expertise in suggesting that the introduction of diverse or fluid language use inevitably transforms more than the actual language use in class. I am concerned too that in selling our goals as a means, we are fostering an evidence-based approach that risks disqualifying the promotion of linguistic diversity as justifiable in itself; that in accommodating to the idea of individual merit, we are reproducing a politically questionable perspective on education; that in disciplining those who fail to meet our expectations, we are disregarding our own attachment to linguistic separation; and that in representing other concerns with language as beyond the pale, we are depoliticizing our own goals as ideology free and preventing transparent debate about what type of language use at school is desirable, when, and why.

I am aware that in formulating these concerns about translanguaging, I am taking issue with a well-liked concept that has served as the vehicle for genuine attempts to promote a more inclusive linguistic climate at school and elsewhere. In light of the continuing political opposition to this project, such criticism may be seen as ill-judged and ill-timed, if not as consciously destructive. My answer to this is that I share much of the political agenda behind translanguaging and believe too that present-day education is deserving of a linguistic makeover. But I am not sure if such a change can be achieved in the way that we are now promoting translanguaging. Apart from the reasons above, its current promotion comes up against the dilemma

that societies adhering to liberal, Enlightened principles value linguistic separation *and* diversity, and that at the end of the road, pupils will be evaluated for their skills in a monolingual, academic type of language. This dilemma will not soon disappear, seeing as (some form of) liberal Enlightenment is not, for the time being, going to. If this sounds pessimistic, Billig and his colleagues indicate that '[d]ilemmas may be constant within society, but our present dilemmas will reflect our present society' (1988, p. 148) to underline that change *is* possible: not by removing dilemmas, since this implies removing all argumentation and thinking, but by replacing them with new ones so that people start debating different issues. This would be feasible by changing the underlying conditions of a debate (discussion over, say, child labor dissipates when parental wages are high enough to live comfortably), or by 'win[ning] a present argument, in order to change the agenda of argumentation' (1988, p. 149). If so, what underlying conditions should we target? How do we win the present debate about language at school to start talking about something else?

One goal for social action could be to concentrate on changing the conditions that make us argue so much about language at school. It is not set in stone, for example, that education must be the prime, and increasingly singular, motor for social mobility and welfare, and we can ask questions about the endless debate this generates about how, and through which (linguistic) means, pupils can be given the fairest opportunity to distinguish themselves from others at school. Identifying and militating for other emancipatory routes (through, for instance, fostering honorable and secure low-skilled work) could liberate schools from their social credentialing function, and give them a chance to experiment more freely with linguistic diversity. Alternatively, we could invest in developing convincing arguments to win the debate. Arguing that not just schools, but all governmental institutions should accommodate to linguistic diversity could take off the pressure from teachers who are the easiest victim of authorities and academics and broaden the critical mass of supporters. Advocating this as a matter of social justice *tout court* may be a more successful strategy than brandishing the supposed effectiveness of introducing linguistic diversity in such institutions or flagging the alleged cognitive advantages accruing to multilingual speakers. Yet a convincing argument cannot probably ignore that others may find the imposition of linguistic diversity or fluidity across the board unfair, nor overlook that justice may also reside in providing access to a socially valued, pure register, depending on the circumstances (Van Parijs, 2011). Thus, putting social justice at the center does not simply lead to the protection of diversity; it creates new dilemmas (when and where is it just to invest in linguistic diversity or uniformity, and how do we minimize the possible costs?) – but these may be preferable over the current ones.

One way in which these questions become less abstract is by addressing the elephant in the room. It must strike the neutral observer as odd that we sigh with exasperation when teachers and policy makers hesitate to embrace linguistic diversity, while we would think twice about transforming our own journals and conferences into multi-, if not translingual, locations for science. Our preference for a monolingual, English, variety is understandable in light of our ideological history, not to mention it has immense practical advantages. But it is remarkable that, as scholars of language, we rarely debate the unfairness that this preference may give rise to nor discuss the attenuating measures that may have to be taken. We would be excellently qualified too for investigating the effects of an experimentally translingual journal or conference on our professional practice and on the subjectivities and allure of the colleagues participating in them. That we are hesitant to engage in such debate or experiment may be revealing of how commonsensically we strike a balance between the value of linguistic inclusiveness and the need for a swift, transparent exchange of critical information. That this balance is unequal may not be unreasonable. But that we refrain from justifying it and attending to the negative side-effects, however, may be a missed opportunity for transforming a commonsensical linguistic choice into a defensible decision – if it does not deprive others working in different domains from much needed inspiration in their own pursuit of a justified compromise between chronically conflicting linguistic concerns.

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## Conflicts of interest

None.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2017.12.001>.

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