



Content list available at www.urmia.ac.ir/ijltr

***Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research
(Book Review)***



***Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*, Suresh A. Canagarajah. New York: 2014. 212 pp., ISBN: 978-0415-68400-2.**

Shizhou Yang ^{a,*}

^a *Yunnan Minzu University, China; Purdue University, US*

In his recent book *Translingual Practice*, Canagarajah argues for a paradigm shift in language teaching and research. Instead of seeing language as entities isolated from each other, and norms as prescribed and fixed, the readers are challenged to consider constant interactions between languages and negotiation of norms through practice. All ten chapters of the book are devoted consistently to this central argument, which contributes some new understandings to recent discussions in composition studies and applied linguistics on postcolonial approaches to the use of English in diverse contexts (e.g., Higgins, 2009; Lu & Horner, 2013; Pennycook, 2010; 2012).

The author draws on several schools of thought. From a dialogic philosophy, Canagarajah takes language use as constantly shifting, though without being shaped by norms of some sort. Based on studies from sociolinguistics, Canagarajah supports his argument that translingual practice exists both in pre- and post- colonial times, both in South Asia and the West (Chapter 2). Using conversation analysis of interactions between speakers of different English varieties, the author further asserts that English is translingual, involving negotiation of norms through actual encounters between people through language use (Chapters 4 & 5). Negotiation principles and strategies are illustrated from detailed and insightful analysis of the speakers' moves through their often imperfect and yet effective communication. Through ethnographically oriented studies of his own multilingual class and himself, in addition to textual analysis of an African American woman's academic publication, Canagarajah shows that similar practice also feature multilinguals' writing (Chapters 6 & 7). Drawing on an interview study of skilled African migrants working in diverse English-speaking countries, Canagarajah makes the point that for multilinguals, difference rather than sameness is the norm, thus presenting a need to reconsider communication within translocal spaces (Chapter 8).

In borrowing from the above mentioned sources, Canagarajah has often kept his usual sober tone of critique, carefully expanding the concepts to mirror the actual dynamics of processes through which norms are created. For instance, when citing Blommaert (2010), the author discusses scale as a useful concept to capture how norms of different orders and currency can be invoked in

* Corresponding author: Yunnan Minzu University, China; Purdue University, US
Email address: yangshizhou@hotmail.com

© Urmia University Press

 10.30466/ijltr.2015.20408

contact zone communication (pp. 154-157). Meanwhile, Canagarajah points out that scales are not prescribed or static. Rather, the interlocutors may engage in re-scaling processes, thus changing the very norms that inform their communication (pp. 158-159). Through refining existing terms like this, the author time and again centralizes individuals as agents in any successful communication (e.g., pp. 112-3; p. 126).

The book introduces several important concepts. Most important of all is perhaps *translingual practice*, which refers to the mixture of languages and other semiotic means in spoken and written communication in any contact zone (see esp. Chapter 2). *Performative competence*, a concept central to successful translingual practice, concerns language users' actual ability to do things with language as cultivated through practice (p. 174). *Alignment*, an overall capacity for strategy use, refers to multilinguals' practice-generated ability to adopt and adapt existing and emergent resources for successful communication in contact zones (p. 174). Last, to summarize the essence of the book, is the concept of dialogical cosmopolitanism, which highlights the making of language forms, identities, and norms through active collaboration and negotiation between parties from diverse backgrounds, values and tendencies (p. 195).

Overall, the author has succeeded in delivering what he promises. That is, both in conversation and academic writing, there is room for multilinguals to engage in translingual practice, mixing their diverse linguistic and cultural resources in their language use to negotiate new norms of acceptance. These are valuable insights, as they invite us to consider the possibility of multilinguals acting as agents of linguistic change, instead of being trapped in a deficiency label of being a non-native.

However, I still have some reservation, particularly in three areas. First, in speaking, it seems that contrary to the author's argument, negotiation occurs only at a small scale, e.g., the meaning of a particular word or expression such as 'blowing' (p. 71). In effect, both parties in all cited examples speak a language whose grammar, word order, pronunciation etc. all suggest it is English, an overall similarity that has functioned as a common ground to enable micro-level negotiations to take place. Second, academic writing, particularly when writing for publication, is different from the multilingual class that the author leads. In other words, in real academic writing, there might be limited interactions over multiple drafts for an extended period of time that allows the luxury of guessing and waiting. As such, I am not convinced that translingual strategies used in the classroom, e.g., keeping a stretch of discourse in a different language without explanation, would be effective in communication with journal editors and reviewers. Third, it may be necessary to speculate on the degree to which the language proficiencies and other non-linguistic resources that interlocutors bring with them contribute to successful negotiations in contact zones. Note, for instance, that most of the participants in the studies are linguistically proficient, in the sense that they have published in English or work in English speaking countries or study in English-medium graduate schools. The situations may be rather different with novice English learners and users, particularly those in EFL contexts.

The book is theoretically grounded, but well-written and easy to read, with illustrative examples from diverse studies. It adds new understandings to earlier conceptions of language learners not as deficient non-natives, but as 'resourceful' agents (e.g., Pennycook, 2012, p. 99). The book does well in reminding us of the shaping role played by unequal power relations in human interactions (p. 195). It also poses forceful challenges to monolingual and form-based approaches to language teaching and research. For these reasons, I would definitely recommend the book to Applied Linguists, TESOL/TEFL professionals, and graduates in these areas. For them, the book offers useful insights in how to create mini versions of 'identity texts' (Cummins, et al., 2005, p. 5) that contribute to both self-enriching language learning experiences and 'cultural synthesis' (Freire, 1971, p. 183) in a world of increasing translocal interactions.

Do I recommend the book to Second Language Writing scholars too? After all, the author has recently questioned the existence of L2 writing as a distinctive field, if even L1 is already translingual (Canagarajah, 2013), and thus possibly making some of us uncomfortable and even resentful. However, rather than treating the book as heretic, I believe it is more productive for L2 writing to engage in a dialogue with its ideas and the author behind, considering especially how a vision of language learners as resourceful agents and a shift away from monolingual orientations to language teaching and research may inform our own practices. To follow Canagarajah's own argument in the book, I see new possibilities, hybridities that transcend the limitations of both, emerge in the contact zones between translingual and L2 writing scholarship. As the field embraces a 'transdisciplinary' orientation (Matsuda, 2013, p. 450), translingual practice may offer yet another critical lens to see the real complexity of L2 writing and the agents who produce the writing. For that purpose, I recommend the book to L2 writing scholars as well.

References

- Canagarajah, A. S. (2013). Disciplinary dialogues: The end of Second Language Writing? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 22, 440-441.
- Cummins, J., Bismilla, V., Chow, P., Cohen, S., Giampapa, F., Leoni, L., et al. (2005). ELL students speak for themselves: Identity texts and literacy engagement in multilingual classrooms. Retrieved July 10, 2010, from <http://www.curriculum.org/secretariat/files/ELLidentityTexts.pdf>
- Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Higgins, C. (2009). *English as a local language: Post-colonial identities and multilingual practices*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Lu, M.-Z. & Horner, B. (2012). Translingual literacy, language difference, and matters of agency. *College English*, 75(6), 582-607.
- Matsuda, P. K. (2013). Response: What is second language writing—And why does it matter? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 22, 448-450.
- Pennycook, A. (2010). *Language as a local practice*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Pennycook, A. (2012). *Language and mobility: Unexpected places*. UK: Multilingual Matters.