

REVIEW

The concept of translanguaging and its implications for bilingualism and multilingualism research

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ABSTRACT

In his conference for Abralin ao Vivo, Li Wei offers an overview of the concept of translanguaging and its theoretical and methodological implications for research on bilingualism and multilingualism. According to the lecturer, using translanguaging is moving between different linguistic structures and systems, including different modalities, and going beyond them. The term comprises the entire set of multilingual linguistic practices, and, for this reason, is a transformative act. Thus, the concept of translanguaging enables bilingual and multilingual individuals to employ their complete linguistic repertoire in order to understand and produce meaning. From this point of view, the presenter urges people to start thinking about multilingual communication as a complex practice, which raises new questions regarding fundamental topics related to human communication.



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RESUMO

Na sua conferência para a Abralin ao Vivo, Li Wei oferece um panorama sobre o que é translanguagem e quais são as suas implicações teóricas e metodológicas para os estudos sobre bilinguismo e multilinguismo. Para o conferencista, usar translanguagem é deslocar-se entre diferentes estruturas e sistemas linguísticos, incluindo diferentes modalidades, e ir também além deles. O construto compreende todo o conjunto das práticas linguísticas dos multilíngues, sendo um ato de natureza transformadora.

Assim, através do uso da translinguagem, bilíngues e multilíngues podem ter a oportunidade de usar todo o seu repertório linguístico para compreender e produzir sentidos. É a partir dessa concepção que o apresentador traz provocações para que se passe a pensar a comunicação multilíngue como uma prática bastante complexa, o que gera novas questões em relação a assuntos fundamentais relacionados à comunicação humana.

KEYWORDS

Translanguaging. Bilingualism. Multilingualism.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Translinguagem. Bilinguismo. Multilinguismo.

The conference *Trans-Ing Language and Cognition: Debates and Directions of Translanguaging Research* delivered by Li Wei took place on July 27th, 2020. The talk was mediated by Caroline Tagg, Professor of Applied Linguistics and English Language at the Open University and Secretary of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL). The recording is available at Abralin's channel on Youtube.

Li Wei is Chair of Applied Linguistics and Director of the University College London Centre for Applied Linguistics, and Principal Editor of the *International Journal of Bilingualism and Applied Linguistics Review*. His main research interests include multilingualism and multilingual practices, paying special attention to translanguaging. He has edited successful books in the bilingualism field, such as *The Bilingualism Reader* (2000) and *The Blackwell Guide to Research Methods in Bilingualism and Multilingualism* (2008). It is paramount to highlight his work with Ofelia García on translanguaging, including the indispensable book *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education* (2014). In his conference for *Abralin ao Vivo*, the linguist synthesizes the main concepts relating to translanguaging and promotes a discussion about its theoretical and methodological implications for the study of bilingualism and multilingualism.

The term translanguaging has appeared more consistently since the last decade, even though it was created in the 1990s and has been used in different areas since then. The origin of the word is attributed to Colin Baker (2001), who used it to refer to the pedagogical practice of using the bilingual's two languages in the classroom in a fluid and dynamic manner. When this practice is employed, students can receive instructions in one of their languages and complete the task at hand in the other language, for example. Following its first uses, the term has been adopted by researchers in order to characterize the linguistic practices of bilingual and multilingual individuals. The popularization and expansion of the term owe a great deal to the work of Ofelia García who, in 2009, defined translanguaging as "the multiple discursive practices bilinguals engage in to make sense of the bilingual world".

The conception of translanguaging is based on the studies about languaging, which postulate that human language is heterogeneous and involves different processes. The idea is for language to be considered not as a formal entity, but as a multiple organization of processes which enable interactions that transcend historical and cultural dynamics and practices. According to this perspective, demarcations of what are paralinguistic, extralinguistic, or linguistic elements do not exist in human communication.

In addition to encouraging us to think about human language as a heterogeneous practice, the perspective of translanguaging also brings into question the idea of “named languages” (Portuguese or English, for example). During his lecture, Li Wei calls attention to the fact that named languages are political-cultural concepts that are associated with an ideology which assumes that each nation has only one language. For this reason, the invention of nation-states also led to the notion of monolingualism. The translanguaging approach, on the other hand, goes beyond the boundaries of named languages. It should be stressed that the idea of translanguaging does not deny the existence of named languages, it just highlights the fact that they are historically, ideologically, and politically defined.

With these considerations in mind, translanguaging is addressed by the lecturer as a practical theory; that is, the theory is based on practice and, in turn, also serves practice. Along these lines, Li Wei claims that his interests in terms of linguistic practices are the ones of bilingualism and multilingualism. In other words, he is interested in understanding how people convey meaning on a daily basis and make sense of the world when they have elements of two or more languages. According to the lecturer, the use of translanguaging enables individuals to move between different structures and systems, including various modalities, and go beyond them. Some examples used to illustrate said practices are a conversation between elderly Singaporean men who use elements from different named and unnamed languages to produce meaning in a fluid and dynamic manner, and digital communication, which uses components from named languages, as well as images and emojis, to make meaning in an integrated way. Thus, translanguaging comprehends the entire set of linguistic practices of multilinguals, and, for this reason, it is an act of transformative nature.

For Li Wei, translanguaging is a transformative concept because it creates social space for bi/multilingual individuals to bring together different aspects of their experience as well as their physical and cognitive skills in order to convey meaning. Within this approach, a bi/multilingual person is someone who is aware of the existence of named languages as political entities, acquires some of their functional aspects, and is able to use them in communication in a fluid manner, therefore employing their complete linguistic repertoire without the social and political markings of named languages.

The presenter likes the term translanguaging especially because it accounts for these kinds of practices. It is a concept that enables us to understand distinct linguistic phenomena that transcend the boundaries of named languages, as well as the limits between language and other ways of conveying meaning. Moreover, the notion of translanguaging invites us to rethink multilingual communication as a complex type of speech, which makes use of different linguistic varieties and registers,

as well as multiple modalities and media to make sense of the world. Hence, it is a construct that raises new questions regarding fundamental issues related to human communication and cognition.

Some implications of the use of translanguaging are demonstrated through the answers given by Li Wei in response to questions written on the chat, at the end of his presentation. The questions are relevant to the topic and generate valuable answers that enable the discussion of some points which were not directly addressed during the lecture.

A question that emerges at the end of the conference is common in discussions about translanguaging and it regards how this concept differs from the one of code-switching, a term that is extremely popular in the bilingualism literature. Code-switching refers to the alternations between the languages of a bi/multilingual in specific communicative episodes (LI WEI, 2018). This process occurs spontaneously among bi/multilinguals when they communicate with other individuals who share the same languages. Even though there is some overlap between the concepts, Li Wei claims that translanguaging is different from code-switching because the former is an analytical approach that allows the investigation of practices he is interested in because it focuses on the way individuals use different linguistic, semiotic, and cognitive resources to convey meaning, going beyond the boundaries of named languages. According to the professor, the concept of code-switching does not permit such investigations because studies that employ the term focus on structural or functional analyses of the process of integrating different grammatical systems into one coherent unit and the purposes these switches might serve (LI WEI, 2018). Thus, the linguist affirms that both concepts can coexist and be used in distinct contexts, given that they serve different purposes.

Another question concerns the practical applications of the concept in the educational context of language learning. Li Wei acknowledges that there is a growing interest of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach. In his opinion, the biggest impact would be on monolingual educational policies, because this approach goes directly against them. While monolingual individuals can use their full linguistic range for learning and assessment, bilingual individuals can rarely do the same. This change could benefit the learning experience, the identity, and the subjectivity of speakers of minority languages, for example. Adopting this perspective, the creativity of multilingual individuals is highlighted by valuing their ability to break boundaries between named languages and linguistic varieties as well as by allowing them to use their skills in order to question, problematize, and articulate ideas (LI WEI, 2011).

In summary, it is through the use of translanguaging that bilinguals and multilinguals have the opportunity to employ their full linguistic repertoire in the classroom in order to build their learning process. This concept is especially important in contexts where there is a minority language that tends to be eliminated or even prohibited from being used, in favor of the majority language of the place. As rightly put by Li Wei, the main objective of learning an additional language is to become bi/multilingual and not a monolingual speaker of that language. Accordingly, it is by valuing all the linguistic resources available to an individual that a more equitable education can be provided to bi/multilinguals from different contexts.

Rich in insights, Li Wei's talk invites us to reflect upon the existing conceptions of language as well as upon the implications of the translanguaging perspective for the areas of bi/multilingualism and educational contexts. By adopting the concept of translanguaging, it is possible for us to rethink bi/multilingual communication as a complex practice that employs different linguistic and non-linguistic resources and that cannot be limited only by the languages spoken by the individuals.

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