Book Review

Composition rhetoric translingual turn: Multilingual approaches to writing


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This edited collection brings together widely recognized scholars and strong new voices in the field of Rhetoric and Composition to respond to the “growing recognition that ‘English’ can no longer be taken for granted as the assumed linguistic and institutional home territory of its courses, programs, and scholarship” (p. 1). *Reworking English in rhetoric and composition* combines twenty-first century elements of cross-cultural communication and pedagogy to push the discourse and teaching of writing studies forward. This book is a timely and much needed theoretical exploration in a field that since its origins has defined itself through metaphors of the English language as unchangeable, monolingual, and equivalent to literacy. It is of special relevance to those in Writing Program Administration (WPA) who are interested in developing a writing culture which accounts for students’ already existing diverse linguistic and writing practices. *Reworking English* puts research in Rhetoric and Composition about translingual literacies and writing practices in conversations with scholarship about the dynamic repertoires of multilingual individuals. This collection answers to Horner et al.’s (2011) call for a translingual approach, in which the authors contend that:

> [...] a translingual approach argues for (1) honoring the power of all language users to shape language to specific ends; (2) recognizing the linguistic heterogeneity of all users of language both within the United States and globally; and (3) directly confronting English monolingualist expectations by researching and teaching how writers can work with and against, not simply within, those expectations. (Horner et al. 2011: 305)

*Reworking English* then extends the literature on translingualism by persuasively reminding readers that the idea of English as monolithic only relies on
monolingualist ideologies that marginalize the language practices of multilingual students.

The collection consists of a three-part structure. The first part entitled “Reworking language” lays the theoretical foundation by interrupting long-held notions of English as unilateral and uniform. The second part entitled “Locations and migrations: global/local interrogations”, draws from diverse geographical and socio-historical spaces, such as the People’s Republic of China, The United States, Jamaica, Lebanon, and Singapore to examine language and national language policies in practice. The third and final part “Pedagogical/institutional interventions”, suggests specific ways in which translanguaging functions as an orientation and practice in U.S. writing classrooms and teaching contexts influenced by Western American educational practices. These three sections provide a nice balance between, the theoretical, the spatial, and the pedagogical implications of translanguaging. And although, the first section and certain chapters of the latter units saliently lead the collection’s overall argument, the book persuasively projects a more fluid and plural reality of the English language.

Composed of four chapters, part one of Reworking English begins the work of mapping out this renewed language orientation by presenting English as diverse and not always dominant. In “The being of language”, Marilyn M. Cooper draws on A. Suresh Canagarajah’s view of language as emergent and Salikoko S. Mufwene’s ecology of language to convincingly argue against presumed notions of language as singular and static. Cooper reminds readers that interlocutors and writers can, and do, shift language practices. That is, language-users’ practices can cause practical and syntactical changes to what we understand as languages. Similarly, Jonathan Hall’s chapter “Multilinguality is the mainstream” challenges monolingualist orientations by creating a hypothetical scenario in which the culture of college writing is one that reflects the nation’s multilingualism. In doing this, Hall seems to do a play on counter-narrative to make noticeable that college writing pedagogies and assessment do not reflect translanguaging in their curricula. As Hall bluntly argues, in this multilingual hegemony, students “are part of the class, but they are not yet part of the course, part of the curriculum” (p. 43). Although Hall’s dystopic semi-counter-narrative seems to miss how in the flip-scenario the same power-structure remains, as the so-called “monolingual” students are being unfairly assessed through a monolingual view of multilingualism, it does offer commentary on the potential for translanguaging to specifically address issues of educational and social justice. In addition, Hall’s scenario works as a reminder of the necessity of understanding multilingualism through a translanguaging orientation in which the very idea of a monolingual student is non-existent, and educational justice is at the center of
pedagogical practice. Educational justice is especially relevant to the U.S. context in which multilingualism is not celebrated in the same way for all student populations. This seems to be a move that various fields of education are taking on and certainly one that the writing classroom should account for. Celebrating and inviting all students’ diverse linguistic repertoires into the writing classroom opens spaces for creativity and criticality, reshaping power structures so students are not individualized test-takers but social learners who can effect social change.

Along with Cooper’s and Hall’s criticism of the treatment of one English language variety as the only language for academic discourse, in “English only through disavowal” Brice Nordquist draws on Joseph Roach’s concept of the “surrogate double” to dismantle monolingualism in widely used composition handbooks that claim to address multilingualism. Nordquist’s chapter explores how Standard Written English (SWE) enforces arguments of languages as uniform and systematic and is presented as the target language for academic success. Nordquist forcefully illustrates his point by showing how writing handbooks recognize language varieties in our global context, but brand such discourse for “multilinguals”, and “low stakes writing” (p. 61). For instance, a handbook developed for multilinguals may acknowledge the existence of multilingualism and diverse language practices, but presents the English language as monolithic and a symbol of American education. Nordquist’s investigation forms an important reminder on how language varieties are still understood through a monolingualist lens and not utilized in equitable ways in the teaching of writing. Moreover, his notion of the surrogate double can also be seen as a way to foment a critical literacy through the practice of demystifying harmful ideologies in the production of texts.

However, it is Weiguo Qu’s chapter “Critical literacy and writing English: teaching English in a cross-cultural context” that leads this theoretical first section of Reworking English and forcefully disrupts the ideology of the English language as internally uniform. This is one of the few places in the collection that speaks directly to colonial relations of power and social justice. Qu argues that in the present-day English is exclusively understood as colonizer and monolithic, but this is obviously inaccurate with its history of hybridity. Similarly, Qu adds that in the current Chinese culture and Chinese language varieties, Mandarin Chinese dominates and permeates notions of language and culture. Therefore, in the context of China, where Mandarin is the dominant language and culture, English “may be a good candidate to de-automatize habituated ways of thinking, challenging and subverting the power relations embedded in Chinese traditional rhetoric” (p. 72). Qu argues that he has observed how his students have been able to “have more than one way of
perceiving the world” (p.73) in his English argumentation course at Fudan University in Shanghai, China. It is this idea of choices in cultural and linguistic perceptions of the world, in which power is not always exclusively situated in one place but rather negotiated, that makes Qu’s argument for critical literacy through language diversity consistent and crucial to our multilingual time. Qu’s de-automatization and critical literacy pushes forward the argument about the transformative potential of multilingualism in rhetorical studies.

Part two of Reworking English entitled “Locations, and migrations: global/local interrogations” examines the local, without ignoring the global, and in many ways illustrates Qu’s point about the need for careful examinations of cross-cultural localities of language. In the opening chapter, “From the spread of English to the formation of an indigenous rhetoric,” LuMing Mao incorporates a decolonial perspective to language. Mao artfully investigates the construction of a nationalist rhetoric in the modern People’s Republic of China through Walter D. Mignolo’s “delinking” in which languages in the context of globalization are quickly moving and translocating meanings of origin. As Mao puts it, “[the rhetoric of cultural nationalism] no longer confines its presence to a place defined by physical boundaries; further, it moves into a space populated by exigencies it aims to respond to, experiences it aims to transform, and communities of practices it aims to build” (p.82). In the case of China, Mao discovers that Chinese finds itself intertwined with heavy notions of global capitalism. In addition the Chinese Communist Party ties itself with notions of Confucianism to make itself seem more ethnic and “indigenous” demonstrating how language and its attitudes are fluid and hybrid. Mao’s analysis grants readers an approach that complicates previous ways of thinking about translingualism that overlook colonial difference and power.

Rachel C. Jackson’s “The people who live here: localizing transrhetorical texts in Gl/Oklahoma classrooms” examines the locality of language in a global context, as she argues for a “transrhetorical” turn in the writing classroom. By transrhetorical Jackson means “those rhetorical practices arising from and facilitating transcultural movement, interaction, and exchange, between both individuals and groups” (p.92). While Jackson pulls from the Oklahoman situation to create her argument, others in this part of the collection look at the Jamaican, Lebanese, and Singaporean rhetorical contexts of how language policy can construct, restrict and extend movements that are both global and local. Such explorations, specifically in Nancy Bou Ayash’s “U.S. translingualism through a cross-national and cross-linguistic lens,” unveil how writing teachers respond to language policy, and, as Bou Ayash argues, “affect the implementation of [language ideologies] in their own teaching practices” (p.118). Bou Ayash’s findings help readers grasp the important role that
teachers play in disseminating and (re)constructing language ideologies in their teaching practices.

The last section of *Reworking English,* “Pedagogical/institutional interventions,” is of great importance in the “reworking of English”. It demonstrates that adequate writing and composition pedagogies are at the center of translingualism. Patricia Bizzell’s opening chapter “Toward ‘transcultural literacy’ at a liberal arts college,” offers a teaching example on how she structures her own writing classes for a twenty-first century multilingual body of students – including assignment ideas and prompts – at a Small Liberal Arts College (SLAC). While of course in the field of Rhetoric and Composition it is understood that SLACs have distinctive writing cultures from those at large research universities, Bizzell’s approach to writing seems extremely in-tune with language in practice and the ways in which Englishes and multilingualism operate in the college writing classroom. Bizzell draws from Claire Kramch’s and Lachman M. Khubchandadi’s works which debunk notions of native speakers to challenge her students and herself – as a translingual student-teacher – to explore the dynamic character of language in the writing classroom. Bizzell’s chapter serves as testimony that writing is and can be translingual through our shifting language ideologies. However, her chapter also offers important criticism in regards to how scholars and educators arguing for “trans” lingual/language pedagogies (mis)carry this ideology to practice in their own academic discourse. Bizzell eloquently points out that while translingual scholars spend time debating over ideologies, such as code-meshing vs. code-switching “academic English remains in play” as an entity (p.134). This means that what is being published in academia is still mostly permeated and voiced through one variety of English, sending the message that multilingualism is welcome until it meets academic discourse.

The last chapters in this final section of *Reworking English* investigate important questions, such as how can writing center tutoring practices pluralize our writing ideologies? And what ideologies lead our notions of “markedness” or writing accents? David A. Jolliffe’s “The Arkansas delta oral history project,” prompts educators to consider that a translingual orientation is not just about looking forward, but also looking back to examine local communities’ histories of transnationalism, and their economic consequences. Jolliffe’s chapter on the Arkansas delta provides an excellent bridge between translingualism, community engagement, and the politics of locales that may see themselves as unaffected by the global movements of people and the fluidity of language(s). This chapter offers a strong insight into how translingualism – as ideology and practice – is not just an urban or metropolitan approach to the teaching of writing, but an ideology that takes into account “the give-and-take between decolonization and reinhabitation” of place, and language (p.178). It works in
great contrast to the collection’s “Afterword” and expressed resistance to translingualism in a space that may be often overlooked for its language diversity.

Karen Kopelson’s “Afterword: on the politics of not paying attention (and the resistance of resistance)” is perhaps literally and ideologically the outlier in this collection, but a necessary and poignant piece on an Rhetoric and Composition academic’s testimony on the difficulty of not only shifting language ideologies of SWE as academic language, but also recognizing linguistic diversity in places that imagine themselves as monolingual, such is the case for Kopelson’s Midwest/Southern institution. Kopelson’s orientation – to some extent a more traditional literature approach – offers readers a critical theory perspective of the reading of power dynamics. In addition, her expertise in queer theory presents an eloquent critique on the “fetishization” of difference, thus polarizing precisely the differences hoping to be embraced.

*Reworking English* is in many ways a call for more conversation across fields interested in adequate and socially just educational approaches, but such conversation requires what Qu identifies as critical literacy and cross-cultural/disciplinary sensitivity. Indeed, as Bizzell points out, code-meshing and codeswitching are often debated in “trans” lingual discourse, but canonical works in the exploration of code-switching, such as Ana Celia Zentella’s (1997) *Growing up bilingual*, and her perspective of both, codeswitching and “anthropolitical linguistics” are not cited or explored as a way of challenging notions that code-switching is a way of maintaining languages as separate. Likewise Canagarajah’s research on the fluidity of language and the rhetorical potential of multilingual writers moves between fields and his work can be an example of how the field of Rhetoric and Composition can contribute to the conversations in fields like Education (García and Li 2014). Similarly the work of scholars in fields such as, Anthropology of Education, Critical Applied Linguistics, and Bilingual Education move between fields and can greatly influence conversations in the *Reworking of English*, especially in regards to how power functions both in the classroom and in language policy.

Horner and Kopelson’s collection contributes to a much needed conversation in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, but also across fields trying to better understand, design, and create classroom spaces that reflect the nation’s multilingual reality. College classroom spaces necessitate that instructors pay close attention to the relationships and power dynamics of language and writing between the global, the local and the in-between of students’ linguistic agency and “timespace” (Vigouroux 2009). This collection is a step forward for Rhetoric and Composition and while in some ways it demonstrates that the field is still somewhat lagging in understanding language in practice, how metaphors of power function in the global/local contexts, and how multilingualism is seen
from the viewpoint of students and individuals who are seen as and identify as bilingual. *Reworking English* offers other fields a strong sense on how monolingualist views function as much more regimented in notions of academic writing. Horner’s “Introduction” and chapters like Qu’s Mao’s and Bizzell’s push the conversation on how Writing Program Administrators ought to respond to not only changing populations, but our understandings of language and writing diversity.

**References**

