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Citation for published version:

De Meulder, M, Kusters, A, Moriarty, E & Murray, JJ 2019, 'Describe, don't prescribe. The practice and politics of translanguaging in the context of deaf signers', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 40, no. 10, pp. 892-906. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development

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To cite this article: Maartje De Meulder, Annelies Kusters, Erin Moriarty & Joseph J. Murray (2019): Describe, don't prescribe. The practice and politics of translanguaging in the context of deaf signers, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181>



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Published online: 21 Mar 2019.



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Describe, don't prescribe. The practice and politics of translanguaging in the context of deaf signers

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ABSTRACT

In this article we discuss the practice and politics of translanguaging in the context of deaf signers. Applying the translanguaging concept to deaf signers brings a different perspective by focusing on sensorial accessibility. While the sensory orientations of deaf people are at the heart of their translanguaging practices, sensory asymmetries are often not acknowledged in translanguaging theory and research. This has led to a bias in the use of translanguaging in deaf educational settings overlooking existing power disparities conditioning individual languaging choices. We ask whether translanguaging and attending to deaf signers' fluid language practices is compatible with on-going and necessary efforts to maintain and promote sign languages as named languages. The concept of translanguaging challenges the six decade long project of sign linguistics and by extension Deaf Studies to legitimize the status of sign languages as minority languages. We argue that the minority language paradigm is still useful in finding tools to understand deaf people's languaging practices and close with a call for closer attention to the level of sensory conditions, and the corresponding sensory politics, in shaping languaging practices. The emancipatory potential of acknowledging deaf people's translanguaging skills must acknowledge the historical and contemporary contexts constantly conditioning individual languaging choices.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 November 2018
Accepted 5 March 2019

KEYWORDS

Deaf; sign language; minority languages; multimodality; senses; access

Introduction

Consider the following interactions involving deaf signers in a variety of situations:

- (1) Deaf people from different countries use a blend of different sign languages and fingerspelling alphabets when meeting at a conference.
- (2) A mixed deaf/hearing family communicates at the dinner table using mouthing, sign-speaking, voice, and signs.
- (3) A deaf person and hearing sellers at a market communicate using a combination of notes, tapping or holding objects, speech, gestures and signs.
- (4) A hearing non-fluent signing teacher uses spoken English in a classroom of deaf children, while supporting some of her English words with signs.

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*Maartje De Meulde is beneficiary of a "MOVE-IN Louvain" Incoming Post-doctoral Fellowship, co-funded by the Marie Curie Actions of the European Commission

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While the dynamics in each of these situations vary, they show deaf and hearing people use a broad range of semiotic resources to communicate. These examples include combining and rapid switching between linguistic features and modalities such as signing, gesturing, speaking, mouthing, writing (in the air, on paper, on hands or arms), typing (on mobile phones, on calculators, on computers), fingerspelling in different (named) languages, pointing at text, placing a sign on a PowerPoint slide, and so on (see e.g. Holmström and Schönström 2018; Kusters 2017b; Safar 2017). Sometimes these strategies are successful, sometimes not, but all of the above examples could probably, in principle, be called ‘translanguaging’.

Translanguaging, first used by Baker (2001), has now become a well-established concept in (critical) sociolinguistics and applied linguistics (see Canagarajah 2013; Creese and Blackledge 2010; García 2009; García and Li 2014; Li 2011) and has expanded beyond its original conceptualisation to include everyday multimodal communicative acts in markets, libraries, and other public spaces (e.g. the TLANG project¹). Originally, translanguaging described a pedagogy in which a minority language was used in the classroom along with a majority language (Lewis, Jones, and Baker 2012), but since then, it has become a ‘terminological house with many rooms’ (Jaspers 2018, 2). An often-cited recent definition is that translanguaging is ‘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, García, and Reid 2015, 281). García and Li (2014, 19) suggested that we are witnessing a ‘translanguaging turn’ with the term now referring to ‘both the complex language practices of plurilingual individuals and communities, as well as the pedagogical approaches that use those complex practices’.

‘Translanguaging’ is currently used in both descriptive and prescriptive ways. It can be used to refer to a bilingual pedagogy, multilingual spontaneous language practices, everyday cognitive processes, a theory of language in education, as well as a process of personal and social transformation (Jaspers 2018). The concept has been extended to include the political project of transformation as a matter of social justice and the linguistic human rights agenda (García and Li 2014), and has been seen as a means of transforming linguistic inequalities and as such having the potential to reframe everyday language practices and legitimize the mixing of diverse semiotic and modal repertoires (García and Li 2014, 116). The past two years have seen a number of overviews of the uses of translanguaging theory, and critical articles reviewing its potential and shortcomings, sometimes evaluating translanguaging alongside other neologisms such as polylinguaging or metrolingualism (e.g. Jaspers 2018; Jaspers and Madsen 2016; Li 2017; MacSwan 2017; May 2018; Pennycook 2016; Rosiers and Slembrouck 2018; Turner and Lin 2017). Jaspers (2018, 2) has pointed out that translanguaging, in some representations, is ‘becoming a dominating rather than a liberating force’, portraying minority language activists as having naïve, uninformed ideals, and translanguaging as ‘the only rational, ideology-free option’ (a critique also advanced by Charalambous, Charalambous, and Zembylas 2016). This illustrates the risk that translanguaging could become linguistic prescriptivism in new clothes. In the context of spoken minority languages, scholars have identified the risk of translanguaging practices and policies for minoritised languages, arguing that translanguaging as the promotion of fluid language practices can be a threat to the integrity and maintenance of language varieties important for minoritized language groups (see e.g. Canagarajah 2013; Cenoz and Gorter 2017; O’Rourke 2019).

Our contribution to this recent explosion of critical reviews is not merely an application of the translanguaging concept to sign languages, but also to bring a different perspective to the debate by focusing on the senses and sensorial accessibility. We believe this analysis of deaf/hearing interaction can contribute to general translanguaging theory by attending to sensory differences and how they afford, as well as constrain, semiotic repertoires.

The ‘translanguaging turn’ (García and Li 2014) challenges the six decade long project of sign language linguistics and by extension Deaf Studies to legitimize the status of sign languages and, correspondingly, the right of deaf people to acquire and use a sign language in educational and community settings. These fields have based their work on a presumption that the path to

acknowledgement of deaf people's linguistic needs, in education and in daily life, hinges on a paradigm of sign languages as (named) minority languages. Within this context, a prescriptive use of the concept of translanguaging understandably raises concerns since it is easily perceived as the validation of sign systems based on spoken languages over sign languages, or fluid language practices mixing codes, the exact opposite aim of what advocates for the maintenance of sign languages as minority languages and for the use of sign language(s) in the classroom are trying to achieve.

Thus, one of the questions this article raises is whether the concept of translanguaging and attention to deaf signers' fluid language practices and semiotic resources is compatible with efforts to maintain and promote sign languages as named languages. These efforts are still seen as highly relevant within deaf communities. Until fifty years ago, signed languages were seen more as mimicry and gestures than as 'real' languages (McBurney 2012). Could translanguaging as a theory and a practice possibly threaten the political discourse for sign language rights in education and beyond?

Indeed, as we will set out below, the translanguaging in the examples above involve structural and sensorial asymmetries in the form of unequal access to linguistic resources. Attending to the ways in which the sensory experiences of deaf signers contra hearing signers or non-signers are differentiated illuminates how the use of translanguaging, where it concerns deaf signers and their communicative practices, has risks. By attending to the physical constraints inherent in deaf bodies, e.g. unequal access to spoken language and in some circumstances, written languages, we therefore aim to problematise the concept of translanguaging and its emancipatory potential and explore the theoretical tensions that translanguaging presents in a Deaf Studies context. However this is not a mere theoretical question, since for many deaf people, theoretical applications of translanguaging, especially in educational and legal contexts, have effective consequences.

Going forward, in this article we discuss discourses of translanguaging as a theory versus a practice, as a lens (i.e. descriptive) versus a policy (i.e. prescriptive), and identify some biases and emancipatory potentials in the application of translanguaging to the context of deaf signers. We start with explaining how sensorial asymmetries impact on translanguaging, followed by some recent critiques on translanguaging. We then discuss sign languages as minority languages and recent research on deaf people's multilingual practices and linguistic repertoires, and translanguaging within deaf education settings. We end with a call for closer attention to the level of sensory conditions, and the corresponding sensory politics, in shaping languaging practices, and discuss several issues the use of translanguaging as a theory and a practice has to contend with.

Sensorial asymmetries

In the context of sign languages and deaf education settings, the translanguaging concept has been used to describe bilingual or multilingual pedagogies (Allard and Chen Pichler 2018; García 2009; García and Cole 2014; Holmström and Schönström 2018; Lewis, Jones, and Baker 2012; Swanwick 2017). It has also been used as a framework to describe and/or theorise deaf people's languaging practices in translation projects, shops and markets, village settings, theatre productions, deaf organisations, and language classes for hearing parents (Kusters 2017a; Moriarty Harrelson 2017; Murray 2017; Robinson 2017; Safar 2017; Snoddon 2017). There further is a wide body of literature using a lens or theoretical framework similar to translanguaging without using the term as such (e.g. Bagga-Gupta 2000; Humphries and MacDougall 1999). Indeed, while translanguaging may always have been a part of deaf people's everyday language practices, most past research on deaf people has problematised these practices.

This must be seen against the backdrop of innovations in the field of Deaf Studies which is, like (critical) sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, a field very much in flux (Kusters, De Meulder, and O'Brien 2017). A longstanding vein of research on deaf people, called 'the field of deafness' (Lane 1992) has positioned deaf people as having multiple cognitive and linguistic deficiencies. The field of sign linguistics, and by extension Deaf Studies, which rose to challenge such stigmatising narratives of deaf people, has tended to adhere to narratives of linguistic purity and language separatism

(Palmer and Martínez 2013), privileging the distribution of signed and spoken language into distinct and separate language practices. Neither approach leaves much room for the study of the use of semiotic repertoires in daily communication.

Sensorial asymmetries between deaf and hearing people, and in particular, the sensorial dispositions in which deaf people live and communicate shape their translanguaging practices, therefore, the issue of 'access' to semiotic resources is crucial when considering translanguaging in the context of deaf signers. It is possible that the promotion of translanguaging practices could legitimate practices that are deemed accessible to deaf people, but in reality are only partially accessible because of such asymmetries. An example of this is the use of speech with limited use of signs or gestures (see Kusters 2017b; Kusters et al. 2017). In addition, it is possible to mix/blend signed and spoken languages simultaneously by e.g. 'sign-speaking' (Zeshan and Panda 2018), which entails bi- or multimodal translanguaging. These are interactions of high modal density and complexity (Norris 2004) which illustrate how sensory asymmetries do impact what information is accessible and which (and how many) resources a person needs to utilise to understand the other. Hearing signers' reliance on spoken language can and often do skewer power relations in mixed settings. Indeed, while the combined use of spoken and signed language has been called 'translanguaging' (see examples 2–4 at the beginning of this article), only *some* forms of combining sign and speech are accessible, for *some* deaf people, in *some* situations.

These asymmetries distinguish the use of translanguaging in the context of deaf signers from the use of translanguaging in the context of other language minorities. Translanguaging can involve structural asymmetries (e.g. May 2018); however, for deaf signers it also involves sensorial asymmetries, which is our main argument in this article. Translanguaging is useful for describing the rich, multimodal and multilingual nature of deaf people's communicative practices; therefore translanguaging in the context of deaf signers is useful as a descriptive concept. However, it should not be a prescriptive framework. A prescriptive use of translanguaging, namely seeing all multimodal communication as equally accessible, or emancipating, overlooks sensorial asymmetries and differential access to semiotic resources but also and crucially, might threaten the vitality and maintenance of sign languages as minority languages. Translanguaging as an idealised pedagogical approach also has risks, given that the majority of teachers teaching deaf students are not proficient in a sign language (Allard and Chen Pichler 2018).

Deaf and hearing people process multiple sources of information from their available semiotic repertoires, but deaf people have varying levels of access to auditory information. This does not mean they have no access – auditory information can be made visible, and deaf people are able to convert auditory input into visual input (Bahan 2014). Most deaf people, while they have developed skills in visual/tactile communication have no, reduced, or contextual sensory access to spoken languages. (Note that this is different from having sensorial access to a language by hearing it or by seeing its script but not knowing/understanding it.) Contrary to popular belief, not all deaf people can lipread. Because of differential access to education, not all deaf people access all languages to the same degree. Many deaf people, if they speak, have a so-called 'deaf accent', and for various reasons may or may not be comfortable with others hearing their speech. Many deaf people choose to speak selectively (i.e. in some situations and/or some languages but not others), and select situations in which they use auditory stimulation (by using hearing aids or cochlear implants), if they do so at all. They may choose to speak but request or expect people to write or sign when responding. While the current generation of deaf children with a cochlear implant has a widening opportunity set in terms of access to languages *and* modalities, in many cases, many deaf children's access to sign languages remains compromised (Humphries et al. 2016).

Recent critiques of translanguaging

Some of the recent criticism translanguaging has faced concerns the claims that it has 'emancipatory', 'agentic' and 'transformative' potential, and is 'socially critical' (e.g. critiques by Flores 2014;

Jaspers 2018; May 2018; Rampton 2017). A main critique in this regard comes from May (2018). While he acknowledges critical sociolinguistics' recent demolishing of language boundaries in favour of 'the far more complex linguistic repertoires of multilingual speakers' has its intellectual merits, he problematises the tacit acceptance of and/or failing to critique the wider socio-historical and socio-political context that often motivates the political mobilisation of minorities in the first place, and precedes and confines the choices people can make (65). This acceptance or failure to critique can have significant socio-political and educational consequences for minorities because it leads to the enforcement of linguistic inequalities. This is all the more problematic, he argues, given the emancipatory concerns of critical sociolinguistic scholarship. Translanguaging is not by definition agentic and emancipatory because it under-emphasises or even simply ignores the ongoing impact of structural constraints such as unequal 'capital', access to education, mobility, family background, personal dispositions, language ideologies, political oppression, etc. He refers to this as the 'flattening of difference' (McLaren 1997 in May 2018, 69): 'the presumption that in effect, all choices are equally available to all multilingual interlocutors'. This is not the case: structural constraints delimit choices and do so differently for different individuals.

A similar position is advanced by Jaspers (2018), who problematises the profuse meanings of translanguaging, primarily as a bilingual pedagogy, and its self-proclaimed transformative and socially critical potential. He argues translanguaging trades on causality effects that cannot be taken for granted and in doing so, translanguaging scholars have 'more in common with the monolingual authorities they criticize than it may seem' (5). He further states that translanguaging has led to fluid language use now being associated with 'postmodern' values 'like being disruptive, critical, agentic, and in tune with a globalized world', living up to contingent ideas of what a sensible, socially attractive person is, while non-hybrid language practices become associated with a 'hopelessly outdated identity' (8). This risks that conceptions of language feed into a regime of truth with 'good' and 'bad' subjectivities. Moreover, linguistic justice may also reside in 'providing access to a socially valued, pure register, depending on the circumstances' (Van Parijs 2011 in Jaspers 2018, 9).

However, not everyone agrees with this belief that translanguaging might possibly work against the efforts of minoritized communities to preserve, protect and promote their languages and linguistic practices. Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015, 282–283) state that 'translanguaging, as we understand it, helps to disrupt the socially constructed language hierarchies that are responsible for the suppression of the languages of many minoritized peoples.' In the context of American Sign Language and English, Snoddon (2017, 2) has made a case for recognising translingual practices as enabling, contending 'it is possible to support minority language rights while recognizing the inherent hybridity of a named community's linguistic resources' with the acknowledgement that the history of ASL is characterised by heteroglossic language practices, 'featuring creative use of various language resources and the performance of hybrid, multimodal linguistic repertoires' (5), such as with the examples in the beginning of this article.

Sign languages as minority languages

Historical trends influencing the portrayal of sign languages

Sign languages have often not been seen as fully-fledged languages, and as such have often been considered malleable to change or even replacement, via invented signs or codes. There have been numerous attempts in many countries to develop manual codes for spoken languages (Evans 1982; Van Herreweghe, De Meulder, and Vermeerbergen 2015). Parallel to the development of these codes, in the U.S., deaf leaders threw their weight behind the Total Communication movement. Total communication was defined as 'the use of speech and lipreading along with the use of home-made gestures, facial expressions, body movements, formal signs, fingerspelling, writing, illustrating, amplification devices, and whatever other methods will reach deaf children' (Jacobs 1986, 17). This is

a curious list, mixing linguistic and semiotic resources alongside technological devices such as hearing aids and visual material objects. This list is the product of a political strategy by deaf people to re-insert visual communication in deaf education after nearly a century of its absence but it is also a remarkable statement on the heterogeneity of communicative practices adopted by deaf people. In practice, however, Total Communication has often meant the prioritisation or domination of spoken language, with the addition of selected signs from manual codes, blending modalities in such ways that favoured auditory input, thus perpetuating sensory asymmetries in deaf education (Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989).

The advent of formal linguistic research on sign languages had the aim of showing sign languages were neither gestural systems nor manual codes for spoken languages but legitimate languages (McBurney 2012; Murray 2017). This project of re-identifying and solidifying the legitimacy of sign languages meant the first generation of sign language researchers brought a new understanding of these languages into the community: that of sign languages as distinct languages. This understanding, often illustrated through the attachment of national identifiers to the languages being studied, aided in shifting deaf peoples' ideological conceptions of their sign languages as malleable to being distinct and bounded – by geographical, cultural and sociological factors (Murray 2017). This naming and delineation of sign languages (which parallels earlier processes in spoken languages [Makoni and Pennycook 2006]) brought about further delineations among sign languages beyond national identifiers. These include distinctions between signs developed by deaf people over time and the invented manual codes for spoken languages, which were presented as a distinction between 'natural' and 'artificial' languages (Branson and Miller 1998).

Beginning in the 1990s, the bilingual bicultural movement began to replace Total Communication as a preferred educational philosophy among deaf people. This movement advocated the use of national signed and spoken languages as two distinct languages in deaf education, drawing upon existing research on bilingual education in spoken languages. Early Scandinavian sign bilingual education proposed that the first language of deaf people is sign and the second is the written form of the wider community's spoken language (Svartholm 2014). Alongside this view comes a discouragement of language blending in simultaneously speaking and signing (O'Neill 2017), also reflected in deaf community discourses which sought to promote national sign languages as distinct languages.

These critiques had the effect of establishing and maintaining boundaries between 'real' sign languages and other forms of manual communication, including gestures. The distinction between gesture and sign was seen as a critical task for early sign language linguists (see Branson and Miller 2006; McBurney 2012). Boundary maintenance became seen as essential for the preservation of natural sign languages. This was reinforced by deaf community campaigns to use sign language as a tool towards achieving 'equality', drawing inspiration from campaigns among ethnic minorities and users of minority languages. Oft-times, legal recognition of sign languages was seen as a means to achieve language rights (De Meulder and Murray 2017; Murray 2015).

Sign languages and the minority language paradigm

The minority language paradigm is in itself grounded in a view of languages as bounded entities and minority languages as representing particular cultural and linguistic resources which need to be preserved, protected, and promoted from the encroachments of majority languages. This paradigm fits well with the situation of many sign languages, seeing as how its use (and its users) are still stigmatised. Because deaf signers are also perceived as people with disabilities, the medical and genetic discourse has been dominant and is stigmatising deaf bodies (Bryan and Emery 2014). Sign languages have been (and often still are) seen as inappropriate in the education of deaf children (see Ladd 2003), needing standardisation (see Adam 2015), seen as manual codes for spoken languages (see Van Herreweghe, De Meulder, and Vermeerbergen 2015) and as the subject of devaluating, audistic, stereotypical and economic ideologies (see Krausneker 2015). Less prestigious varieties of sign languages can be especially stigmatised, such as Black ASL (McCaskill et al. 2011) and Hawai'i

Sign Language (Lambrecht, Earth, and Woodward 2013). Also, national sign languages generally have more prestige and institutional support than for example ‘village’ sign languages (Blankmeyer Burke, Snoddon, and Wilkinson 2016). Discourses for sign language rights often employ a monolingual paradigm in arguing for the separateness of distinct sign languages, and the perceived linear relationship between sign languages and deaf identities (see Kusters et al. [Forthcoming](#)). Campaigns for the legal recognition of sign languages often invoke arguments for national affinity and the importance of a ‘unifying’ sign language for national identity. This can be seen as the flip side of other arguments which emphasise the distinctiveness of sign languages from spoken languages, the argument being that sign languages are distinct but indigenous, and thus part of the national cultural heritage. Furthermore, ideological contestations between sign languages and ‘artificial sign codes’ sometimes end up in legislation, specifically the issue of whether laws overtly distinguish between the natural sign language and the artificial code (De Meulder, Murray, and McKee [forthcoming 2019](#)).

The symbolic, instrumental and educational linguistic language rights sign language recognition legislation seeks continue to be important, especially in current contexts with a growing concern about the vitality of sign languages. This concern originates in the loss of congregated spaces where sign languages can emerge and be transmitted (primarily deaf educational settings which are diminishing because of increased mainstreaming), increase of medical interventions and state-of-the-art hearing technologies with an exclusive focus on spoken language acquisition, and neo-oralist discourses which question the ‘need’ for sign language of deaf children and openly support sign supported speech (not translanguaging) as a valuable route in educating deaf children (e.g. Knoors and Marschark 2012).

At the same time, the increase of formal learning opportunities, technological innovations such as apps to learn signs and the wider availability of sign languages through broadcasting and social media mean there is a growing number of hearing people who adopt ‘signs’ (not necessarily a named ‘sign language’) in their linguistic repertoires (De Meulder 2018). A recurring concern from deaf people about these innovations with ‘signing’ becoming more mainstreamed is that hearing people (or deaf new signers, for that matter) are learning individual ‘signs’, but not ‘sign language’ as a whole (including grammar, prosody, different registers and so on), and that they often merely use those signs to support their speech, or produce some signs in a random order and claim that is ‘sign language’. There is a real concern that to ‘promote’ translanguaging in this case mean people will (continue to) use utterances that are often inaccessible for deaf people.

This all points to how sign language recognition discourses may also clash with discourses about language change and the examination of this language change, not only in terms of language shift, endangerment and loss, but also through the lens of multilingualism and engaging with and studying practices of translanguaging and (multimodal) language repertoires (e.g. Blackledge and Creese 2010; Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015). Because if sign languages change and signers’ linguistic repertoires widen, so do signers’ practices, and it becomes much harder to determine what is it we are trying to recognise, protect and promote, why we do that at all, who can decide what it means, and how to go about that. This thus also links to debates about authority, authenticity and ownership, about ideologies of vitality and revitalisation, and who is allowed to make decisions in this matter.

Multilingual practices and linguistic repertoires

Translanguaging in practice

Contemporary research by linguistic anthropologists, inspired by work in translanguaging, has moved beyond those paradigms seeing signed languages as named languages, by centring deaf people and their everyday communicative practices. This research focuses on deaf people’s multilingual practices and linguistic repertoires as a point of reference, by engaging in linguistic ethnography

(Hou and Kusters [Forthcoming](#)). The study of gestures as an integral component of deaf people's semiotic repertoires (Green 2017; Kusters 2017b, 2017c) and the removal of the notion of 'having or not having a language' (Moriarty Harrelson 2017) from the conceptual framework has expanded the boundaries of what constitutes language. This work demonstrates the importance of understanding individual languaging practices as variations on idiolects that are shaped by the diverse life trajectories of deaf people, especially as they are shaped by access (or the lack of) to formal deaf education settings (see Moriarty Harrelson 2017). Furthermore, it has led to an appreciation of the skill of deaf signers who are often well-versed in employing linguistic features adapted to the context and to their signing or non-signing interlocutor, negotiating the constraints and possibilities imposed not only by different modalities but also by different sensorial access to these modalities.

Flexible use of the linguistic repertoire and linguistic accommodation are further impacted by mobility, e.g. rural-urban (Moriarty Harrelson 2017) and international. Kusters (2018) and Zeshan (2015) illustrate deaf people's communicative practices in international settings, though the use of International Sign and cross-signing, which are translanguaging phenomena combining the increased use of iconic structures with the use of signs from multiple sign languages. International Sign does not correspond to a premise of enumerable or bounded languages. Instead it shows and languaging is emergent from contexts of interaction and the mutual orientation toward communicative comprehension in such situations (Green 2014).

Scholars investigating deaf-deaf translanguaging, whether they did or did not use the concept 'translanguaging' (such as Holmström and Schönström 2018; Kusters 2018; Lindahl 2015; Murray 2017; Robinson 2017; Tapio 2014) focus on potential, on strategies in making themselves understood. Scholars have argued that deaf people are especially skilled in translanguaging, for example in using International Sign, because having to adapt to hearing people on an everyday basis (Hiddinga and Crasborn 2015). Kusters (2017b, 2017c) posited that deaf and deafblind people are often more skilled in employing multimodal strategies than hearing sighted people, because they are more practiced in it, leading to them taking the lead in switching between modalities or combining modalities (such as writing, gesturing, signing, mouthing, speaking). Using the concept translanguaging to describe these practices thus draws attention to affordances, potentialities, skills and strategies.

Moral dimensions and asymmetries

Using the lens of translanguaging means not only focusing on actual language practices but also on dispositions, emotions, personal experiences and language ideologies in translanguaging spaces, i.e. how 'human beings use their linguistic knowledge holistically to function as language users and social actors' (García and Li 2014, 32). Researching translanguaging practices of deaf signers means also researching what it means to be deaf in societies predominantly built around the needs of hearing people, how sign language use (or non-use) is related to particular attitudes towards deaf people and sign languages, and how people who interact situate and conceptualise the (named) languages they use (Kusters 2017a). Important in that regard is the ethical dimension of communication.

Canagarajah (2013, 179) writes of a 'cooperative disposition' that people may bring to contact zone interactions, making them potentially 'open to negotiating diversity and the co-construction of meaning', for example treating language norms as open to negotiation, treating language as a constellation of multimodal resources that they can mix and mesh, and having a strong ethic of collaboration. Not everyone develops these dispositions to the same extent (not even if they are multilinguals): personal experience and personal investment are involved too. Some people are more agentive than others, and this is an important aspect when thinking about communicating with people who do not adhere to the spoken language norm. This disposition, perhaps even more than actual linguistic repertoires, impacts on translanguaging practices; and the disposition may, or may not be correlated to attitudes towards (fellow) deaf people and sign languages. Still,

recalling the sensory asymmetries inherent in blended spoken and signed interaction, we must also be mindful of sensory privileges which structure such interactions. Green (2014) made a similar argument when she argued that deaf signers engaging in International Sign rely on and produce *moral orientation*.

Kramersch (2009) in her description of ‘the multilingual subject’, foregrounded multilinguals’ subjective experiences of learning and using particular languages. Examples are affect, desires, aspirations, pain, the embodied reality of tasting, feeling, hearing, seeing particular (named) languages and language varieties. For many deaf people, the modality of speech is related to oppression, in multiple ways: (physically) being forced to (learn to) speak, being expected to speak in a variety of contexts, being expected to understand speech directed at them, and with others not understanding and/or ridiculing deaf people’s speech. The modality of speech is thus fraught with those connotations, with pain, and with ambivalence (Hall 2017). This has implications for how translanguaging may be produced and experienced especially when it includes speech.

Translanguaging and the politics of deaf education

In the context of the historic and contemporary situation of deaf education, deaf people’s lived experiences and the ongoing need for the legal recognition of sign languages, promoting translanguaging could reinforce the argument for the use of deaf educational pedagogies that has often resulted in situations of language deprivation of deaf children because of sensorial inaccessibility to spoken languages (see also Allard and Chen Pichler 2018). The blending of spoken and sign languages in deaf education is not new. Deaf education has cycled through numerous approaches throughout the years (oral approaches, Total Communication, sign supported speech, sign bilingualism). In educational settings, translanguaging has been recognised as an enabling and emancipatory framework for the use of sign language in classrooms alongside spoken and written language (Swanwick 2017). But there have also been concerns that it is just another new neologism; a mere stepping stone towards the (re)establishment of the dominance of spoken language, ‘sign supported speech’ and ‘Total Communication’ (TC) approaches in those settings.

Swanwick (2017) argues translanguaging and TC should not be confused, because TC is a communication philosophy and approach involving the flexible use of languages and modalities to meet individual communication needs (Evans 1982; Moores 2010), while translanguaging focuses on language repertoires and the language practices of bilinguals. She reminds us that TC over the years has become more and more synonymous with an auditory-oral approach where sign language is only used in a supporting role without much attention for the proactive development of children’s sign language skills.

Nevertheless, pedagogical approaches in deaf education are still highly contentious with a history of monolingual spoken language purism in which sign languages are accorded secondary status, when used at all, a focus on spoken language acquisition/speech training and sometimes even prohibition to sign.

The issue of *access* to sign and spoken language is crucial when considering translanguaging. This does not only concern compromised access (to both signed and spoken language) but also an increased focus on access to spoken language while access to sign language continues to be hampered. While the current generation of deaf children with a CI has a widening opportunity set in terms of access to languages *and* modalities in many cases, access to the spoken modality is still not a given, but presumed so by educators. At the same time, for many deaf children access to sign languages remains compromised. In this context, there is a great risk that translanguaging and fluid language practices in effect become a veil for the gradual disappearance of signs or sign language.

Also, when fluid language practices are promoted, how can we ensure that deaf children leave school with sufficient competencies in ‘a’ language? This is especially relevant in deaf educational contexts which often are not able to secure proficiency in even one language. Given the situation

that most deaf children do not acquire sign language from their parents/families, there is a real risk of language deprivation (Hall 2017), wherein children grow up with incomplete and impoverished access to language. This echoes Jaspers' (2018) concern that translanguaging comes up against the dilemma that societies 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' (9). Indeed, bilingual education 'cannot maintain minoritized languages as if they were autonomous museum pieces' (García and Lin 2016, 128) but at the end of the day, what does count as proficient language use for deaf children, and how do we evaluate that?

Describe, don't prescribe

In this article we have critically reflected on the use of the term 'translanguaging' and its implications. We have observed a tension between the study of and attention for daily fluid communicative practices of deaf signers, which are by definition messy, and the utility of the portrayal of sign languages as minority languages, for which the concept of clearly bounded 'languages' is typically presumed, and that does not leave much room for 'messiness'. With different interpretations of translanguaging in deaf education and it becoming associated with 'oralism' or 'TC', translanguaging can jeopardise the current interest in deaf translanguaging (as fluid language practices).

Attempts to bring multimodal language learning pedagogies into classroom settings with deaf children have to contend with deaf education's history of deliberate suppression of sign languages in favour of pedagogies that prioritise spoken language, including both those pedagogies which reject the use of sign languages altogether and those which resort to manual codes in the place of naturally occurring sign languages. The authors share a common concern that a blithe use of the label translanguaging will end up legitimising pedagogical practices that have resulted in deaf people growing up with limited natural language input. It is well and good to see multiple languages interacting in an urban market setting, but the hidden presumption made by translanguaging scholars is that all their informants have unfettered sensorial access to linguistic input. This assumption cannot be made for all deaf people. The use of multiple communicative tools is not necessarily something to be valorised in a sweeping movement, when it is an attempt by someone to create meaning from an impoverished set of linguistic tools.

The use of translanguaging in Deaf Studies has to contend with the critics noted above. By adopting translanguaging as an ideological framework, deaf communities might be giving up a more or less secure language rights framework for less certain payoffs as 'communicative competence' further down the road. Particularly relevant here is the critique that the concept overlooks existing power disparities which condition individual languaging choices (Block 2014). We do not seek to legitimize languaging practices (such as TC in deaf education) with a history of contributing to power disparities based on one's amount of hearing ability. Nor do we seek to adhere to a form of language separatism/purism that does not fit the lived realities of deaf lives, which involve interaction with multiple semiotic codes and linguistic competencies across the lifespan.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that deaf people have long been engaging with discourses of linguistic separatism, informed by 'segregational linguistics' (Makoni and Pennycook 2006). This informs current perceptions of translanguaging. Indeed, while languages are seen as a construction from a sociolinguistic perspective, this does not prevent language users from treating languages as separable entities. The very idea of languages as bounded concepts enables fluid language practices, and is influential in how people make sense of these. We follow Møller (2019) that this is something sociolinguists need to acknowledge, and Martin-Jones, Blackledge, and Creese (2012, 10) that

[...] we are obliged to take account of what people believe about their languages, to listen to how they make use of their available linguistic resources and to consider the effects of their language use – even where we believe these 'languages' to be inventions.

Turner and Lin (2017) make a call to incorporate the naming of languages in translanguaging theory, and to harness the social category of named languages to expand a speaker's linguistic repertoire as an end in itself.

Deaf people do engage in translanguaging practices and as deaf scholars interested in deaf lives, as well as in the creative use of communicative strategies by human beings, we have an interest and an obligation to explore these strategies. We will go so far as to say that translanguaging is central to the deaf experience. In our acceptance of these lived realities we can also recognise the sensory politics (Bahan 2014) which constantly condition these practices. Studying translanguaging among deaf people, with different lived sensory experiences, requires attention to ideologies applied to these sensory orientations. Deaf people and others with a diverse range of sensory, cognitive, and physical difference have commonly been subsumed under the label of 'disability' instead of 'diversity' (Bauman and Murray 2014). But to adequately explore their lived experiences, we need to acknowledge such stigmatising ideologies not only exist, but also condition how we assess and value these experiences.

The dilemma we noted at the beginning of the article is still with us. How do we engage in this research without taking away useful political tools from a marginalised community? Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) state that 'a full understanding of what is meant by translanguaging' ...

allows us to graduate from the goal of 'language maintenance', with its constant risk of turning minoritized languages into museum pieces, to that of sustainable practices by bilingual speakers that thrive in spatial and functional interrelation with the sustaining linguistic practices of others speakers (283).

In order for this to happen, this requires a change in ideologies surrounding deaf people and sign languages. People who are seen as disabled in communication will need to be reconceptualized as potentially being very adept at languaging in an increasingly diverse world.

This means the minority language paradigm is still useful in finding tools to understand deaf people's languaging practices as stemming from a marginalised position. Cenoz and Gorter (2017) and O'Rourke (2019) write about the need for 'breathing spaces' (as introduced by Fishman 1991) or 'safe spaces' (Creese and Martin 2006) for minoritised languages – spaces where one particular language is (expected to be) used, rather than multilingual language practices where languages are mixed. The context of O'Rourke's study is that of 'new speakers'. In the context of signed languages, a form of this idea of 'breathing space' actually has been around for a very long time: e.g. meetings where only a signed language is used (even if all or some of the people present would otherwise communicate in a spoken language), or in spaces like deaf clubs. Usually, in these spaces sign languages are used alongside one or more written languages and other semiotic resources so they are rarely monolingual spaces, but usually speech is implicitly or explicitly not accepted because (among other reasons) it is not accessible for deaf people. This is beginning to change, and 'new signers' (De Meulder 2018) specifically present a challenge to this concept of 'breathing spaces' because their language practices and capacities often differ from those of 'traditional signers' when entering these spaces. For example, some are still learning a sign language when entering, and have acquired a spoken language first.

Studies of translanguaging must also contend with the social, political inequities involved in languaging decisions, and the differentiated privileges given to different sensory orientations in different spaces. The insights in this article on sensory experience draws from the experiences of deaf people, but can be applied far more widely. How do languaging practices in a noisy fish market hall or discotheque differ from those taking place in a hushed library? How does the visual input of an in-person meeting shift when participants are also calling in via video conference? How do cultural biases towards loudness or gesture condition practices and responses to these practices? Others (Pennycook 2017) have noted the role of material conditions in shaping languaging practices. We call for a closer attention to the level of sensory conditions, and the corresponding sensory politics, in shaping those practices. Translanguaging exists within a dense web of new, inherited, and regenerating relations of power, difference, and stigmatisation. Translanguaging is here to stay. The

emancipatory potential of acknowledging deaf people's skills at translanguaging must acknowledge the historical and contemporary contexts constantly conditioning individual languaging choices.

Note

1. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tlang/index.aspx>.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Jürgen Jaspers and three anonymous reviewers for their generous feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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