

# CLD CORNER—Translanguaging: A New Term for an Old Concept? Not Quite...There's So Much More



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In an interdisciplinary team within the school setting, an improved understanding of the practice and the terminology of different disciplines is of value in order to work together both effectively and respectfully. In that vein, this article attempts to bring to light, as briefly as possible, the term of *translanguaging* in an effort to broaden the knowledge of bilingual and monolingual speech-language pathologists (SLPs). Case in point, about a year ago, I was invited to a roundtable attended by bilingual educators and bilingual SLPs. The title of the roundtable was “*The Role of Translanguaging in Dynamic Assessment with Emergent Bilinguals with Disabilities*.” My first thought was that translanguaging in this case referred to *code-switching*, which is a term that SLPs are familiar with and are aware of when working with children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Sure, I know what that is, I thought to myself. Let’s get this conversation started. To my surprise, I was partially correct, and, hopefully, my blushing wasn’t too noticeable. My ears perked up to better understand, and since that day, I’ve needed to rethink what translanguaging is and how it applies to all SLPs and not just bilingual SLPs.

Following are some definitions of translanguaging: (1) the process whereby multilingual speakers utilize their languages as an integrated communication system; (2) a dynamic process in which multilingual language users mediate complex social and cognitive activities through strategic employment of multiple semiotic resources to act, to know, and to be; and (3) the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages (Otheguy et al., 2015). At first glance, this can be thought of as code-switching, but that is only a part of the whole picture. So, let us unpack these definitions a bit.

One of the most outstanding components of the definition of translanguaging is that the multilingual speakers use an integrated communication system. Contrasting this, using the term code-switching, one assumes the notion that one language is separately switched on and another off, using elements of one language while speaking in another and always following the correct grammatical rules for one of the languages (Brice, 1997). Translanguaging, however, infers that the person uses one whole integrated language system rather than separate languages or named languages (such as Spanish or English). That one whole language includes the vocabulary, forms, and pragmatics fluidly and interchangeably that are used as needed or wanted according to the situation or the interaction listeners. François Grosjean (2009) described the bilingual as “...an integrated whole who cannot easily be decomposed into two separate parts...he has a unique and specific linguistic configuration.” In Spanish, there is a term, *idioma*, for named languages that are identified by social, political, or ethnic affiliation of its speakers. Therefore, Spanish is an *idioma*, and the use of language in the sense of a method to communicate is simply *lenguaje*. The term *idioma* would not fall into the definition of translanguaging because it does not recognize that a person uses a named language but rather his or her own *idiolect*, or an individually unique language system. Translanguaging then is what bi-/multilinguals do when they deploy features from their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning (Ortheguy, García & Reid, 2017).

Moreover, as a multilingual, mediating complex social and cognitive activities means that the person knows how to manipulate the linguistic requirements of an interaction and uses the knowledge on when, how, and why to use semiotic choices. This all occurs in at-the-moment decisions and is not preplanned with care; it just happens as one would with only one language. Translanguaging does not view greater worth of one named language over another but values the one language the person

uses depending on the situation the speaker views as appropriate and communicatively significant. The semiotic resources refer to the symbols, words, gestures, or prosody that accompany that self-identity or the understanding of how to act. The “to be” is also the identity the multilingual chooses to reveal through the use of his or her idiolect. The sense of self and identity through language is often forgotten, especially in how much worth it is to the person as it encompasses all the experience that has brought this person to his or her language/idiolect. Therefore, as multilinguals, we know when to change a word, use a specific hand gesture, or change our prosody to communicate exactly what we mean to in a way we feel is the most effective and personal.

Ricardo Orthegey also mentions that monolinguals do this as well as the speaker’s knowledge and language are used for different shared situations—using one language for a business meeting as opposed to hanging out at the karaoke bar. We all translanguague seamlessly and are mainly guided by the surroundings and effectivity or expressivity needed at the time. This is usually not taught but is an intrinsic knowledge of language and when to use which features of an idiolect. Just the same, multilinguals use the knowledge they have and use it as they need to communicate or embellish their communication with an audience to get the most of what they want the message to imply.

It’s important to note that Orthegey, García, and Reid do not want to do away with named languages or their existence. However, in terms of bilingual assessment and education, the child’s idiolect should come to the forefront, not a dominant language with other languages with lesser value. Translanguaging does away with the hierarchy, and thereby power and value, of the languages spoken (MuDiLe, 2017). In the same sense, García, Ibarra-Johnson, & Seltzer (2017) write of a “general linguistic performance” that would represent the abilities of the one language/idiolect and “language-specific performance” that takes into account the ability of the child to use two separate languages. Both views are important, but “in assessing the overall language of an emergent bilingual for making decisions of language disability versus language difference, the ‘general linguistic performance’ or translanguaging is vital and cannot be ignored.”

So, in a nutshell, this is translanguaging. Why would it be beneficial as SLPs to know about it? One of the main ideas of an interprofessional team is continuity of service from the assessment and Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meeting to treatment and to the classroom. To have that mutual understanding of the child’s ability to communicate can only benefit everyone in that child’s care and special education service, including the parents. Bilingual educators will appreciate clinicians being on the same page just as SLPs appreciate understanding of our client’s priorities.

In essence, bilingual SLPs have understood translanguaging in different terms. When assessing a bilingual child, we look for the child’s language abilities to communicate, rather than abilities in the different “idiomas” or named languages. We do this during observation or dynamic assessment when we allow the child to communicate in his or her own terms. If not successful in intended communication, then as SLPs we classify breakdown as language delay or disorder but not as a failure as a monolingual or bilingual. We listen as the child fluidly moves from one language to another without discounting it or viewing it negatively. As SLPs, the concept of translanguaging brings closer to the forefront the reasoning behind evaluating the child as a bilingual rather than two monolinguals. The children we see in our caseloads are bilingual by virtue of living in the United States and consciously or subconsciously interacting with an environment that provides input in many ways in another language. Therefore, it is important to steer away from comparing the bilingual child to monolingual Spanish or monolingual English. Even though the availability of the standardized testing for bilinguals is scant, flexibility with assessments and knowledge of bilingualism will give us a fair and educated understanding of the child’s skills and potential to be a successful language learner.

Along the same lines, just as much as we’ve recommended that code-switching is a natural tendency for bilinguals in the therapy room or classroom, we can now talk to bilingual educators in terms of translanguaging. It is the way a bilingual child communicates the best, and if we expect the child to only use one language (Spanish or English), the child may not be communicating effectively

with only a portion of their repertoire (idiolect), placing the student in a clear disadvantage when compared to their monolingual classmates. Schools confuse the assessment of general linguistic proficiency, which is best manifested in bilinguals while translanguaging, with the testing of proficiency in a named language, which insists on inhibiting translanguaging (Ortheguy et al., 2015). The same issue comes up with our assessment tools normed on monolinguals, treatment recommendations, and/or service delivery in only one named language when the need is for acceptance of the child's multilingualism.

Moreover, and possibly the most important point, viewing translanguaging as a way for the child to communicate effectively gives us the opportunity to find value in the child's idiolect, which in turn gives value and respect to all the experiences that have made up this child and his or her individuality. To accept what the child offers linguistically without a negative response or correction as to which language is best will provide the child with confidence to continue building on his or her language skills that are this child's strengths and continue to communicate more successfully. Yes, we would still be providing speech and language therapy with corrective feedback but with an open mind of incorporating the child's skills rather than categorizing them into one or the other named language and not denying their use of their linguistic repertoire. Feedback would still be given in adding to their repertoire in correct forms that would be appropriate whether in English or Spanish or whichever named language. The main goal would be to increase their ability to communicate better without giving greater weight to one named language or the other. Our role is not to teach named languages (idiomas) but to improve their overall language (lenguaje) and their communicative abilities. Many bilingual SLPs are already doing that during treatment as we take into account what the child gives us and provide models fluidly from one language to the other and also while giving feedback. As translanguaging is a new idea and term considered in SLP, a new thought on how to write reports and goals needs to be examined in order to target forms in both languages. An open discussion with special educators and bilingual educators would need to take place. Most importantly, it entails informing parents that hearing their child using whatever language they have is important while providing models that best fit their family, situations, and experiences can only benefit their child's development, communicative abilities, and sense of identity.

**Isabel García-Fullana**, an SLP in Pflugerville ISD, describes the following in her advocacy of that one language system.

*As a school bilingual SLP, my main focus is to determine the child's full linguistic communication skills by taking into consideration all "idiomas" to which they are exposed. My goal when assessing a bilingual and multilingual child is to determine if their communication difficulties are due to a communication disorder or a language difference (indicating that the child does not have a communication disorder, but has their own linguistic system). In other words, when I assess a child, I am actively providing a "translanguaging" approach in order to better understand and serve the child's linguistic repertoire.*

*In the school environment, I constantly struggle with communicating this concept to my colleagues because the majority continue to believe in the old-language dominance paradigm. I don't blame them; this is how the school environment and classrooms are set up. They assume "it's easier" to focus on one named language to better serve students. However, by focusing on one language (English), the administrators, teachers, and parents are not realizing that they are limiting the child's language exposure and language/learning enrichment potential.*

*I am hopeful that the term "translanguaging" catches on because I believe it can provide the mono-, bi-, and multilingual SLP the understanding and tools to initiate an open dialogue regarding valuing and encouraging the benefits of embracing the child's full "idiomas" of linguistic repertoire and hopefully move away from the hierarchical mentality of dominant language.*

As interdisciplinary team members, we need to expand our paradigm about bilingual individuals and expression. Communicating and collaborating with bilingual educators who consider translanguaging

in their classrooms will only benefit the child's speech and language progress and generalization of new concepts and forms. Understanding at least this term may make a world of difference in multilingual children's perception of themselves and their world and, in turn, their language.

### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the contribution from **Steve Daniel Przymus**, PhD, Assistant Professor of Bilingual/Multicultural Education at Texas Christian University.

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