

Language Variation Across Genres: Translingualism Here and There

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In this article, Sánchez-Martín explains how cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) allows writers to explicate linguistic variation in different genres. The article provides a model for how the expansion of understanding in a language allows a writer to notice the diverse resources that are available for them to make meaning in creative and non-adaptive ways.

A fundamental aspect on which authors and readers of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* base their learning of writing is seeing genres as meaning-making activities that are hybrid, mobile and that take place in a process in which a number of other social activities are interconnected to accomplish something.

CHAT helps us understand this. As Joyce Walker explains, this acronym “refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts), that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices” (71–72). Its literate factors, namely, production, activity, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, and ecology (see definitions in Walker 2010) allow us to break down all the aspects that play a role in the writing situation of a particular genre, thus, to become writing researchers.

Now, what is the role of language in relation to all these factors? If genres are fluid, so is the language that we employ to manifest whatever it is that we are communicating with a particular genre.

Defining “Language”

Like any complex concept, finding a single definition of “language” is not possible. Linguists from diverse traditions and time periods define this concept differently depending on their goals, focus and so on. For example, “language” is an innate capacity of all human beings that consists of recurrent grammatical rules (according to Noam Chomsky) or, it can simply be understood as a system of communication.

Now, imagine for a moment that there are no labels for different linguistic systems like English, Chinese, German, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Spanglish, Frenglish. . . etc. Would people in the communities in which those languages are used understand each other even if they didn’t have a name for the language? And if someone belongs to several communities, would that person be understood in whichever community she is in? Surprisingly, she probably would. Languages with no labels are constantly emerging (or linguistic features that do not accommodate to “standard” understandings of languages) to respond to genres that require them. According to Suresh Canagarajah, this has actually been happening with most Western languages until the 18th century (20–21) and still happens with a huge number of “undocumented” languages in the world. Does this mean that before there were “no languages”? There were, they were not just *labeled* as such.

Why did this happen? Generally speaking, history tells us that during the 18th and 19th centuries, industrialization, colonialism and nationalism gave rise to empirical science and the desire to document and analyze things objectively. Through these ideologies and scientific methods, languages became stable, homogeneous entities to symbolize a place and its people. Generally speaking, languages became “standard” and some ways of using language were thought to be “correct,” “proper,” and “acceptable,” while others were not.

For instance, Rosina Lippi-Green analyzes the attributed features of Standard American English (SAE) and concludes that SAE is said to be spoken by people (60):

- with no regional accent;
- who reside in the Midwest, Far West or perhaps some parts of the Northeast (but never in the South);
- with more than average and superior education;
- who are themselves educators or broadcasters;

- who pay attention to speech, and are not sloppy in terms of pronunciation or grammar;
- who are easily understood by all;
- who enter into a consensus of other individuals like themselves about what is proper in language.

According to this description of SAE, who is currently using it? Is it used throughout all genres? If not, in what genres does SAE materialize? What happens to writing that does not accurately abide by these features? What does it mean exactly to not be “sloppy” in grammar? Do these broadcasters/educators also avoid “sloppy” grammar when they tweet? For instance, using “to whom” on Twitter would be much less appropriate than typing in “tmrw” for “tomorrow.” To my knowledge, most people I know do not fit in the description above mentioned; yet they successfully communicate in a variety of contexts and constantly produce genres that are successfully welcomed by their audience. Therefore, although categorizing different ways of communicating as languages such as English, Swahili or Spanish has numerous advantages (like knowing which one you have to learn if you want to move to Australia), this poses some problems, as well.

As a multilingual writer myself, I believe that approaching composition practices from a perspective that pairs CHAT with Translingualism will help me understand the intricacies of genre performances.

Language in Action: Translingualism

First of all, how realistic is a view of language as just “standard”? If we understand languages as correct or incorrect systems then why doesn’t everyone in the U.S., for example, talk in the same way? And why do people write differently than a hundred years ago? Does your roommate write and talk just like you? If you are texting your dad and your BFF, do you use the same resources to do that? Besides the classic example of “soda, pop or coke,” individuals make different choices, (sometimes consciously and others unconsciously) as to how to communicate due to social, educational, cultural, geographical factors.¹

Although many of our linguistic practices are shared by a number of people and, thus, we categorize them in dialects, languages, registers and so

¹If you would like to find out more about your geographical variety of English, here is a link to a linguistic quiz from the *New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/12/20/sunday-review/dialect-quiz-map.html>

on, languages are, above all, living entities which emerge as the result of specific social, cultural and ecological contexts (Canagarajah 2013). Why do we, for example, come up with neologisms (new terms) to describe items, situations, relationships, etc. in our realities? Because of the fact that certain situations require it (we might perceive the need to name something that, until that moment, hasn't had one) and we have the means to do it. For example, using the word "dudevorce"² (Boredpanda) implies that "dudes" exist in specific social groups where the word first appeared. More importantly, the fact that two guys decide to end their friendship is not infrequent in those social groups and, their members recognize the smushing of those two terms. In other words, because groups of people share spaces, activities, beliefs, etc., certain forms of language use are created to refer to whatever it is they feel the need to incorporate to their lives.

Secondly, if you take a look at any genres wherever you are at the moment, you will notice that there are a number of things that communicate something to you that do not fit in an understanding of the English language as "standard." For example, look at the last text or tweet you wrote, the posters, animated GIFs, your default voicemail message, and signs around you. You probably see a number of semiotic resources (emojicons, pictures, different fonts, colors, even sounds and gestures) that people access and use in communication to express meaning besides the plain choice of words. Even when we write a paper using MLA format on "standard, white 8.5 x 11-inch paper" by using black ink and "a legible font" like Times New Roman (Purdue Owl) and in a "standard size (e.g. 12 points)" (Gibaldi and Walter 116), we are juggling different options (font, spacing, color, size) to express meaning. Why only black ink? What does a "legible font" actually mean? Why is 12 points the standard size? Because writers have been encouraged to follow those options and not others, our understanding of academic writing is oftentimes restricted to a prototypical MLA paper, whose elements convey meaning (even if they are seen as "standard") simply because they contrast with others in their classification (black contrasts with green, which contrasts with red, and so on). In composition, we call this "multimodality" and, it expands our notion of writing to more than just putting letters together to express meaning.

Below is a picture of what I see as I am typing this article (see Figure 1). It is a door with origami birds and a heart, a picture in black and white, a birthday card in German, a postcard from Japan with Japanese ideograms, a handwritten translated poem by Rudyard Kipling in Spanish and a photograph of the reflection of a cherry blossom tree. All these objects reveal genres whose performances respond to specific and never-repeatable contexts,

²For more examples, go to <http://www.boredpanda.com/modern-word-combinations-urban-dictionary/>

like the origami birds made in an attempt to decorate a room (emptied after having spent a year abroad) by just using a magazine, a string and some adhesive tape, the only few resources available that day. It is amazing how much meaning we can create when we do not abide to the standard and, we do it all the time. The choices we make will be correct and acceptable depending on our audience, purpose, the tools and knowledge we can access, etc. The options are infinite.



Figure 1: Translingual (and multimodal) composition.

Finally, an association of a language with a group of people and a place makes us think about individuals who belong to several communities (for example, my friend Grace who was born in South Africa but whose family comes from Taiwan, she grew up in Brazil and Portugal, and studied in the U.S. and Spain). Since language is acquired through socialization, how do we define the language of people who grow up in diverse social settings? According to a homogenous view of language, theirs would not be standard, and thus, unacceptable in many contexts. However, if they fit into many social settings, wouldn't they be understood? Taking into account that most people in the world (including us) relate to several communities and therefore to multiple ways of using linguistic systems (especially now that new technologies bring us close to anyone in the world), why don't we change our understanding of language to a more realistic, productive, and creative view?

A Translingual Understanding of Composition

A translingual approach to writing involves acknowledging individual differences in communication. In other words, it implies that everyone, no matter what your first language is, has a unique linguistic repertoire that keeps developing and changing as it is being used in new contexts for a variety of audiences. In this sense, understanding genres as translingual involves multimodality, as well. As previously mentioned, we use a wide range of resources to convey meaning in different genres. In our composing activities we have to navigate a number of sociocultural and ecological factors and prioritize some decisions regarding certain factors over others. We also have to take into consideration the resources available to us. For example, I might have wanted to have a different paper design for the origami birds, but I only had old magazines so I ended up using those.

As far as language is concerned, if I decide to use a Chinglish expression such as “Little Grass has Life” (from Lu and Horner 108) in a short story for young adults in the U.S., it would be worthwhile to add a note explaining that it means “Keep off Grass” in some places (unless I want them to feel confused or find out the meaning by themselves, for instance). While the expression “Little Grass has Life” (or variations such as “Tiny Grass is Dreaming”) is taken up by Chinese speakers as a natural linguistic option, its use among other populations wouldn’t be taken up in such a transparent way. By examining how my readers react to my linguistic choices, I would be much more prepared to understand the trajectory of my writing (the path it takes).

In addition, understanding writing as translingual brings us the opportunity to focus on language issues as a way to gain awareness of larger rhetorical aspects. For example, if I am browsing a university website to study abroad and I see that they talk about “graduate degree” rather than “postgraduate degree” I may be confused as to what degree I should apply for. After researching and doing genre analyses, I may find out that what is usually referred to as a postgraduate degree in the U.K. is, in fact, called a graduate degree in the U.S. Additionally, when writing my cover letter to the institution, I should take into account things such as the date format, spelling and punctuation. Therefore, another advantage of paying attention to translingual matters in composition courses is that it helps you become better writing researchers, since you do not take for granted linguistic choices.

Moreover and, perhaps, most importantly, by seeing composition as translingual, we open up possibilities for writers who come from diverse backgrounds (all writers, actually) and have actually used their linguistic resources successfully in certain genres by taking into account rhetorical aspects such as audience and purpose, but who, due to the homogeneous view

of language, might have been stigmatized for not conforming to the rules of mainstream English in the past. Translingualism helps us cross social barriers.

Finally, seeing genres as translingual helps us to become “citizens of the world” and thus, to add more possibilities to our writing and reach out to larger and more diverse audiences.

What Can We Do in Our Composition Classes?

To begin with, every participant in the class must acknowledge linguistic differences, including his or her own. For example, if you belong to a sorority or a fraternity you might have noticed how the members of your community use language (mostly vocabulary) differently than members from other communities. Or if you listen to hip-hop or country you might have found yourself wondering about some of the expressions that some artists employ in their music that you hadn’t heard before but you may start using them as their music grows on you. For example, I have learned that in the hip-hop community, when something is really good people usually say “it is fire” and that “bars” refer to the lines of a song. But you wouldn’t use those expressions when you are talking about a poem for a literature class, right?

Some of the best examples of translingualism in writing can be found in online communities, such as the social networking and news source website Reddit. As a registered member you can subscribe to specific topics (subreddits) in which you can participate by commenting on posts or creating discussions on the topic. Since I started watching the originally NBC TV show “Hannibal,” I decided to subscribe (follow) its subreddit “HannibalTV.” One of things that I noticed as soon as I started reading the different discussion posts was the use of blending (a combination of two words to create a new one) “Fannibal” to refer to (as you might have probably guessed) fans of the TV show. As a new member of the “HannibalTV” subreddit community, I had never used the term before and didn’t know how people used it. After a Google search and some reading, I found out that the term has been being used online with that meaning since 2013, when the TV show started, by almost exclusively the members of the “HannibalTV” subreddit community. It would be unlikely for people who do not belong to these communities to use the term. Several factors, including the material, social and ecological contexts of production allow for the term to be coined and disseminated. The practices involved in the use of the term are translingual, since they emerge from and are bound to specific contexts to express meaning that is needed in those situations.

The next step is to understand how your own personal language, registers (varieties used in different social situations that require different levels of formality), vocabulary, grammars and semiotic resources (emoticons, visual and audio-visual elements, gestures, etc.) work in different genres. To do this, you don't need to know the nuts and bolts of English grammar or several languages but just to listen to, observe and reflect on your own linguistic (verbal and non-verbal) choices. When you are emailing your ENG 101 instructor, how do you address her? When you are tweeting, why do you change your register? When you text your dad, what choices do you make? When you transform a paper into a PowerPoint presentation, what choices do you make?

Finally, you may investigate how your choices in certain genres relate or not to other people's preferences and think about how they are used and why. This ties to the idea that writing for an audience is something like a constant process of translation, in which we have to think about how to transform our thoughts and knowledge into words that fit our audience's expectations. For example, in an ENG 101 class last semester, my students had to rewrite a recipe found in "Good Food" from the BBC GoodFood website (originally written for a British audience) for someone in the U.S. Some of the things that students had to do were to convert measurement units from Celsius to Fahrenheit, add pictures, simplify the language or add expressions their audience knew, avoid foreign expressions or keep them together with their equivalent in American English, split paragraphs and make them more visually appealing if they were writing to children, and so on.

To sum up, we are all exposed to different types of Englishes and participate in communities in which the use of language varies as represented in a number of genres, but we might not be aware of it. As writers who successfully use language in productive, innovative and creative ways we can pay closer attention to linguistic issues in order to realize how communication takes place in different contexts and for diverse audiences. Just like any other choice you make as you write, feel free to experiment with your language in a manner that acknowledges the situation.

So How to Connect Translingualism to CHAT?

As mentioned in the introduction of this article, CHAT gives us a framework to understand the factors that influence how a particular genre is composed, but we can complement it by adding a translingual orientation in order to understand the role of the languages used and developed in the production, distribution, representation, reception, activities, socialization and ecology of

the situation. In other words, we can pay special attention to the relationship between a writer's linguistic repertoire and the CHAT literate factors in the creation of genres in order to better understand the intricacies of how diverse populations and individuals compose. For example, by applying a translingual lens to the CHAT factors, I can explain how I, as a multilingual writer, create genres such as a Facebook post or a proposal for a conference:

Production: What tools do I need to create both genres, as a multilingual writer? If I type in the proposal with a Spanish keyboard, how do I make sure that I am using the expected apostrophes (´ or `)? Do I need additional tools?

Distribution: Which means of distribution allow me to better perform my identity as a multilingual writer? Which audiences will access the ideas I share via the Internet?

Representation: What do I think is in the minds of my readers and how do I respond to that with my linguistic choices? Do I want to consider their expectations, or do I prefer to emphasize my voice?

Reception: How is my audience going to take up my texts? If my codemeshing strategies (the combination of linguistic codes and modalities) are very explicit and I translate Spanish idioms into English, is my audience going to understand my intention? If they don't, why is that? How many likes/comments do I get in my Facebook post? Is my proposal going to be accepted?

Socialization: Which of my Facebook friends have replied to my post? Is it just my friends in the U.S. or my friends abroad, as well? What do their comments mean to our Facebook relationship? For my proposal, have scholars in my field read it? What sorts of interactions will my proposal (in which I codemesh) prompt?

Activities: What do I do while typing both texts? What sources do I look at? How does my linguistic background influence the access and use of those sources? If my mother language is Korean, do I have access to the same bilingual dictionaries as if my mother tongue was French? If I don't, which other sources do I look at? How do I find them?

Ecology: How do biological and environmental factors relate to the emergence and/or development of languages in a genre? For example, because I am writing my proposal as a member of an institution in the U.S., the language that I use (like referring to myself as a "graduate student" rather than as a "postgraduate student") would not be taken up in the same way in other parts of the world.

Having seen how a translingual orientation to writing can be better informed by CHAT (or vice versa), we can definitely say that all writers have the means to investigate their own practices and, therefore, learn how to use their unique linguistic repertoires to accomplish their goals as in any situation.

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