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REVIEW ESSAY:
DYNAMIC LANGUAGE PRACTICES

*Translingual Practice:
Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*
By Suresh Canagarajah
Routledge, 2013. 240 pages.

In recent scholarship, researchers and teachers in Composition and Rhetoric, New Literacy Studies, Second Language Acquisition, and Applied Linguistics have been focusing on language practices across national, cultural, and linguistic borders. In response to seminal studies on multilingualism and Englishes conducted by scholars such as Jan Blommaert, Jennifer Jenkins, and Braj Kachru, Suresh Canagarajah's book offers a critique of the current linguistic models of global Englishes and the language practices of translingual individuals. Engaging with theories and models from a wide range of disciplines such as Conversation Analysis, Composition, and Applied Linguistics, Canagarajah cogently argues that scholars and teachers in language and literacy studies must turn their attention away from discrete language systems, and pay more attention to the dynamic and fluid processes of translingual practices. Rather than focusing on fixed grammar, forms, and correctness, researchers should examine how individuals mobilize different semiotic resources and adopt different negotiation strategies to make meanings across linguistic boundaries.

In his introduction, Canagarajah explains the inadequacies of current multilingual theories and models. He further stresses that researchers must be more attuned to the ideological nature of language conventions, and focus on

understanding translingual communicative strategies, “thus moving beyond product to process, and exploring implications for meaning construction, language acquisition, and social relations” (11). Ultimately, he advocates for an orientation and attitude that is open towards linguistic and cultural difference.

To back up his theoretical orientation and argument, Canagarajah spends the next two chapters historicizing the ideological and colonial nature of the current monolingual paradigm, and illustrating the valence of translingualism using case studies from South Asia. In these two chapters, Canagarajah persuasively illustrates that translingual practices that use different available linguistic resources have historical precedents, and are dynamic meaning-making processes that arise to address necessary communication needs.

In Chapter Four, Canagarajah is careful in distinguishing his model of translingual English from existing concepts in Applied Linguistics that theorize a similar phenomenon. He addresses models such as World Englishes, English as an International Language, and English as a Lingua Franca. Canagarajah argues that many of these models treat English as a homogenous and stable entity, and do not acknowledge how language identities can be formed outside predefined national and linguistic communities. Emphasizing the dynamic nature of translingual Englishes, Canagarajah also urges researchers to pay attention to power relations’ communicative sites where interlocutors engage in dialogs using different variations of English and diverse semiotic resources.

Distinguishing his model from what he calls the “norm-oriented perspectives” in Conversation Analysis and Pragmatics (78), Canagarajah discusses in details negotiation strategies deployed by individuals who engage in translingual communications. He argues that while CA and Pragmatics assume that shared norms among interlocutors are necessary for effective communication, translingualism is open to difference as a component of the ongoing process of meaning making. In Chapter Five, he divides common translingual negotiation strategies into four components: “envoicing, recontextualization, interactional, and entextualization” (79). Using the transcript of a conversation among five multilingual college students, Canagarajah analyzes how individuals deploy these negotiation strategies during their dialogs. In particular, he demonstrates that even native English speakers engage in translingual practices when conversing with interlocutors who use different versions of the language. These

strategies allow all parties to engage in constructive dialogs with one another, despite their linguistic differences.

Turning back to academia and the classroom, Canagarajah examines ways in which scholars and students can deploy translingual strategies to assert their positionality and to challenge existing power relations. In Chapter Six, he advocates for “codemeshing” as a practice for writers to exert their linguistic and rhetorical competence. Analyzing Geneva Smitherman’s use of African American vernacular English, Canagarajah demonstrates that codemeshing can empower the writer by giving her the agency to disrupt established norms. In Chapter Seven, Canagarajah passionately argues that instead of marking any non-idiomatic expressions as errors, writing teachers should foster rhetorical listening in their classroom, a practice which demands writers to participate actively in the meaning-making process. In other words, both instructors and students must always be willing to engage with difference, and should be open to co-construct meanings through constant negotiations.

Moving from the classroom and conversation contexts to the macro level, Canagarajah discusses the enactment and significance of the translingual model in Chapter Eight and Nine. In these two chapters, Canagarajah analyzes data he collected from in-depth interviews with skilled migrants from Sub-Saharan African countries. He argues that migrants participate in successful dialogs with others by drawing on linguistic resources and other contextual cues that are available to them. In other words, translingual communications are not contingent upon mastery of a language system, or a perfect understanding of grammar. Instead, as Canagarajah points out, these migrants have developed a translingual orientation and “performative competence” that focuses on practice, which in turn allow them to “respond strategically to unexpected interlocutors and spaces with diverse norms in contact zones” (174). These translingual individuals, as Canagarajah argues, exhibit what he calls a “cooperative disposition” towards language use and diversity (179). Characterized as seeing “language norms as open to negotiations” and “having a strong ethic of collaboration” (180), Canagarajah persuasively shows that this disposition can be fostered in the classroom as students are increasingly exposed to multilingual communicative contexts.

In his concluding chapter, Canagarajah summarizes his model of translingualism. He argues that translingual practice is important in working towards “dialogical cosmopolitanism”—a model of cosmopolitanism based on acceptance of difference, collaboration, and self-criticism (196). Finally, he urges researchers and teachers to consider the fluid and dynamic processes in which communities and identities are formed and co-constructed through the tentative precarity of shared interests. As this final chapter clearly demonstrates, this book advocates for an ethical stance on how one should interact transnationally and engage constructively with linguistic and cultural differences.