FOREWORD

Translanguaging as resistance

A few years ago, while doing our Translation and Translanguaging project (https://tlang.org.uk/), I attended a public event organised by the Eastern European Roma Support Group in London to celebrate their achievements. As there were people who did not have direct contacts with Roma people, the Group organisers arranged a number of speakers to give general introductions to Roma history, culture, and of course language. The community worker who talked about language issues made the statement that “Roma people speak Romani, which is a non-standard, mixed language”. She may well have got it from some written text somewhere. But it was not quite what I understood of the language. I must confess that I have always found the idea of “mixed languages” odd because it assumes the named language ideology and furthermore “standard” language ideology.

Here is a story that I was told by a field linguist in China in the 1980s: he and a team of language documentation researchers were tasked to help minority ethnic groups in remote mountain villages in Yunnan province in the southwest of China to (re)construct their languages by designing writing systems, compiling dictionaries and writing grammar books. They recorded some chants from the elders of one of the ethnic minority communities and tried to construct a lexicon and the grammatical rules for that language. In analysing the data, this field linguist noticed words and phrases that did not seem to belong to the language that he was studying – some had known origins in other named languages, so they were classified as “borrowings”, but others had no known origin, not to this linguist at least. So, he asked the community elders, “What language is that?” referring to transcribed words and phrases. The people just looked at him, and said, “You tell us; we thought you were the linguist”. So, the linguist asked, “what does it mean?”. “Ah, that’s a different question”, the people said. “We know exactly what they mean”. But it was clearly not their job to know and even to care about which language the words and phrases belonged to and what name the language should have.

Named languages are socio-politico-ideological constructs, a key argument that translanguaging scholars have been making. They do not reflect psycholinguistic or even sociolinguistic realities in the sense that different named languages are not ‘represented’ differently or separately in the human mind and bilinguals and multilinguals do not switch between different named languages when they are speaking; they speak by drawing on their entire communicative repertoire which comprises elements that could be labelled in terms of different named languages. Moreover, the naming of sets
of linguistic features as language, or dialect, or something else has serious social, political, and of course, educational consequences – wars have been fought and blood has been shed over the naming and categorisation of languages. Likewise, the naming of certain structural features as “standard language” is a top-down construct with inherent power differentials. It is hegemonically imposed by dominant social classes and its social and educational impact has been largely discriminatory. In the context discussed in the present volume, bilingual Roma speakers come up against standard ideologies in two named languages: the official language of the nation state, Hungarian, and a standard variety of Romani, a transnational language with multiple centres of standardisation. The former determines, and possibly limits, their chances in formal education, while the latter frames, and possibly limits, the success of language activism and the ways talking about language rights can be imagined at all.

A serious consequence of the political naming and labelling of languages is that users of different languages are assigned different sociopolitical status and put into different social categories. Languages that have been designated as “immigrant language” and/or “non-standard minority language”, have little chance of being used as the language of instruction in formal education contexts in any country. In the 2021 UK census, only one language can be identified as the “main language” at home. We expect that hundreds of British-born children in the education system whose home language is not English will be identified as EAL (English as an additional language) learners even though they may be using English as their primary language of communication outside the family domain. Will they be supported or discriminated against as a consequence? To be a user of a “mixed language” often implies that their language is non-standard, and that they do not know any language with proper names, specifically national names, properly. What are the social and educational consequences of such labelling? Similar to the London context, the idea of a “mixed language” appears critically in the field explored in the present volume, resulting in a devaluation of local linguistic practices. This volume addresses these challenges by offering alternatives to standardisation whereby local languages can be made part of learning at school.

In the above-mentioned Translation and Translanguaging project, we followed a karate instructor as one of our key participants, who identified himself as London-Polish-Roma and who lived a translanguaging and transcultural life. His son, who grew up in London and speaks Polish and Romani, regards English as his primary language and acts as an interpreter for the Eastern European Roma Support Group. He identifies himself, simply, as a Londoner. In one of our conversations with him, we asked if he would object to people calling him Polish, or Roma, or Polish-Roma, and here’s what he said,
I won’t correct them, because my dad is Roma from Poland and my mom is Polish. But I don’t know what it actually means. I grew up here. I’m a Londoner. I went to a normal school. I have a British passport. I have Polish and Roma roots. But I feel British as much as I can feel it. But sometimes I feel I’m not allowed to feel the way I feel. I don’t belong to a single group. I don’t want to belong to a single group. I can’t belong to a single group. I can belong to all these groups. But I’m also me.

Roma people have long resisted narrow ethnic, national, and social categorisation, as well as the imposition of standard language and literacy norms. Their lived experience is a translanguaging one, and they have heterographic literacy, as discussed in this volume, too, in Chapter 14. Heterographic literacies defy neat, convenient categories, which linguists and educators are so used to. This presents a real challenge, not just to society and its institutions and policies, but also to researchers and practitioners who have a professional concern for the wellbeing of Roma people. Can we use a despised “mixed” language as a recourse for learning? Can we adapt the school space and turn it into one that connects well with the learners’ everyday lived experiences, that enables and empowers the learners’ voice, and that makes good use of community-based knowledge? These are some of the questions that are being addressed by contributors to the present volume, with rich empirical evidence and deep analytical insights. They are also questions that are core to socially inclusive and culturally transformative pedagogies.

Translanguaging seeks to resist and reject the imposition of monolingual, named, and standard language ideologies as well as raciolinguistic categorisation. It also seeks to reconceptualise education. Education can give us a wealth of knowledge in terms of information and awareness. But effective and transformative education develops the learners’ understanding that goes beyond knowing facts, to be able to interpret information presented to them, and come to a view in a specific context. Understanding naturally leads to more questioning and further explanation and interpretation. Translanguaging aims to help the learner, and the teacher, to gain understanding, make sense of it all from their own context and through their own affective and sociocultural meanings.

A distinctive strength of the present volume, and the project upon which the present volume draws, is its participatory approaches. The contributors and researchers took an active and meaningful part of the participants’ social life for data collection and interpretation. They also acted with translanguaging shifts as they followed complex lives and ways of languaging of the multilingual learners in various contexts. Consequently, they gained much better understanding of the linguis-
tic and cultural practices of the participants, of the tensions between policy and practice, of the struggles Roma people experience in schools and society and in transforming their own subjectivities. The research that underpins the chapters of this volume therefore is not only an analysis of translanguaging practices observed, but an example of transformative translanguaging in itself.