Foreword: A Note on Ofelia García

In the days when international travel was still possible (and when I was younger), I would regularly spice up my trips to New York by visiting the Graduate Center of the City University of New York to see Ofelia García and give a talk to her students. I was impressed not just by her and her work, but also by the colleagues and students who shared her enthusiasm for and knowledge about minority language education. I soon learned that this was explained in part by her close association with Joshua Fishman;¹ in her long career, she shared with him exceptionally high productivity, a concern for linguistic minorities and a willingness to innovate. Like Fishman, she was a strong advocate for bilingualism and the recognition of the significance of non-dominant languages and their speakers.

Starting with a jointly written paper in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (García *et al.*, 1985), they collaborated on over a score of papers and books, the last being an issue of the IJSL on Fishmanian sociolinguistics (issue 213); she also co-edited with him a number of highly significant books, including (Fishman & García, 2010; García & Fishman, 2002), and edited a festschrift in his honor (García, 1991). And in his last years, she continued to meet with him when his illness led to his virtual isolation. It was fitting that she served as associate editor of IJSL from 2009 to 2015 and succeeded him as editor from 2015 to 2019.

For many years, García was the leading US advocate for bilingualism. Her first paper, published in IJSL, dealt with the Bilingual Education Act, which she criticized because she thought it was concerned with the assimilation of Hispanics rather than with the language rights of minorities (García, 1983). Her publications and teaching dealt with bilingual education and the rights and problems of Spanish speakers in the United States. Later, she became an expert on translanguaging, a concept developed by Cen Williams in his doctoral thesis (Williams, 1994) and adopted by Colin Baker (Baker, 2001), and first discussed by García in a paper on social justice (García, 2009).

When I first came across the new word, I wondered whether it was another fad adding to the list of language teaching methods (Spolsky, 1979, 1990), but reading García's recent papers, I am now starting to appreciate the value and applicability of the concept. The term is important for making what had been seen as a technical interest in code switching, normally considered by language educators to be a sign of limited proficiency, into a normal practice for those growing up with the complex linguistic repertoires encouraged by multilingual environments such as New York which (García & Fishman, 2002) is celebrated as the multilingual apple. Recognizing the need to replace a goal of producing native-like speakers of authorized named languages with the encouragement of rich multilingual repertoires, she showed her independence of Fishman's favoring of purity (Fishman, 2006a) by approving of the normal language mixing of those growing up with several varieties, making unashamed use of several parts of their language repertoire. By validating this acceptance of multilingual repertoires, she has had a major influence on the freeing of educational linguistics from the chains of the teaching of dead classical languages and allowing for the freedom of living vernacular speech.

In an interview with colleagues from Brazil (Lorenzetti & da Silva, 2020), García expresses concern about what happens to the concept of translanguaging when it institutionally adopted: it was a notion intended initially to disrupt the 'way of looking at bilingual minoritized populations as having a language that is inferior and a language that is dominant, and as having to make sure that [children] followed the norm in both languages, [which] therefore excluded most of these children' (2020: 171). Thus, it is a political act, which leads to feelings of discomfort when one realizes one is working against the state. She confesses that she started with the theories of her mentor Joshua Fishman, but she 'moved because I had a different experience than he had – I had a different life, I was of a different generation...'. She also rejects the notions of Canagarajah [or 'maybe it was Makoni'] who wanted her to talk about 'linguaging' because her concern is with 'bilingual minoritized groups'. Named languages are important – 'I want the students that we work with to be able to be successful in standardized English only exams' – but these bilinguals are not shifting from one language to another: she rejected code switching because there were no structural constraints in the bilingual speech she witnessed. She insists on 'trans' because translanguaging is transit, involving one step at a time.

Sitting at home in isolation, García (2020b) questions two beliefs that she believes work to damage Latin American bilingual students, the notion that they have linguistic deficiencies especially in English, and the idea that the deficiencies extend to Spanish because they lack 'academic language'. These myths lead to comparison with monolingual

English speakers learning Spanish, and miss the implication of their translanguaging repertoires, the result of colonialism and global capitalism. By recognizing this, and teaching ‘with difficult loving care’, she believes that a way can be found to help these minority children ‘resignify their lives and education with dignity’. How this might work in practice is suggested in García (2020a: 558) which discusses how Latinx (male and female Latin American) bilingual pupils learn to read: they do not learn in either of their languages but ‘use their entire linguistic/multimodal repertoire’ and ‘leverage all of their meaning-making resources and all of themselves as they engage with text’. A translanguaging approach that encourages them to use all their resources, linguistic in both varieties and non-linguistic, will free them from the restrictions that condemn them to poorer performance. It ‘has the potential to also reposition them socially and politically’ (2020a: 562), reminding us that García is concerned not just about reading and education but the social and political status of minority groups. What happens in the normal school situation in the United States is the creation of language borders that labels Mexican-Americans (and other Spanish bilinguals) as ‘English language learners’ and thus minoritizes them, denying them access to advanced coursework and further education, and ‘producing an opportunity gap that will result in producing another generation of miseducated, low-wage workers’ (Valdés, 2020). By acknowledging the relevance of developing language repertoires rather than proficiency in named languages, translanguaging offers a much better way of dealing with the problems of minority pupils. Liu and Fang (2020) also show how translanguaging can be used as a basis for change in language teaching.

It was García’s concern for the pupils rather than for the fate of the named languages that they spoke that helps account for her breaking with the ideology of her mentor, Joshua Fishman. Although Fishman was rightly acclaimed by speakers of endangered languages for his support of the process he called reversing language shift (Fishman, 1990, 1991), his original motivation was to try to understand why other languages besides his own beloved Yiddish were under threat (Fishman, 2006b); although more a sociologist than a linguist, he shared with most linguists other than Labov (2008) a concern for preserving named languages rather than for solving the social and political problems of minorities. Although García’s doctorate was in Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian literatures and language, her first job was as a bilingual and ESL teacher and her career has been in education. Translanguaging provided her with the ideological stance to tackle the problems of minority pupils and not to focus on language revival and maintenance. It was this recognition of the political meaning of language issues and the colonialist and racist import of much language teaching that separates her from most applied linguists, who set out to correct the weaknesses of

minority pupils just as colonial powers set out to civilize those they had conquered and enslaved (García & Alvis, 2019).

Translanguaging becomes more than a new term for code switching, and goes beyond the ideological claim of those who talk about languaging. It is rather a call for attention to the complex but regular development of bilingual (and presumably multilingual or plurilingual) individual linguistic repertoires and the recognition of the nature of the repertoires of modern societies.

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Note

- (1) For five years after completing her PhD, she was associated with Yeshiva University.

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