

# 16 BEYOND LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE IN WRITING: INVESTIGATING COMPLEX AND EQUITABLE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

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## OVERVIEW

The goal of this essay is to inquire about the role of language difference in the learning of writing, especially in academic settings where normative and exclusionary views of language and writing dominate.\* The essay begins with the description of a recipe, a genre that includes explicit examples of language difference to explain how a translingual approach to writing can be inclusive of practices seen as “linguistically different” and create opportunities for equity in the ways we think about writing. Next, it questions why talking about language diversity in the composition classroom continues to be a topic that is still marginal, since it is largely discussed in relation to pop-culture or traditional “non-academic” genres, like the recipe. The essay ends with some questions for writers to look at all the complexities of their practices in relation to ideologies and the conditions of their environments so that they can maximize opportunities for equity.

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## INTRODUCTION: A RECIPE FOR THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE IN WRITING

What was the last meal you cooked, or if you don’t cook, what was the last meal you ordered at a restaurant? And what does this have to do with

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language and writing? In this essay, I begin describing a recipe, a genre that includes explicit examples of language difference to explain how our approach to writing can be inclusive of practices seen as “linguistically diverse” and create opportunities for equity in the ways we think about writing in a US composition context.

Let me turn back to the question I started with. For me, preparing a meal tends to involve using recipes like “Spicy shrimp ceviche” or “Aguachile.” This meal is one of my favorites of all time and it consists of “raw” fish that has been marinated in citrus juice and it is put together with veggies like cucumber, onion, tomato, etc. Ceviche is a common dish in Latin America, especially in Perú and México, but you can find recipes to make it in the *Food Network* website and many other blogs and cookbooks for a US audience. The specific recipe I will describe next is published in a book called *Claudia’s Cocina*, and it includes textual choices that do not fit in with notions of “Standard Written English” (SWE).

The very same title of the cookbook is an example: *Claudia’s Cocina*. If you don’t speak Spanish, you might have noticed that the structure of the phrase follows the grammatical “rules” of English for expressing possession (what belongs to who). This tends to be expressed through the apostrophe and the “s”, as in “my friend’s car” or, as in the cookbook, “Claudia’s Cocina.” However, the title of the book includes a word in Spanish (cocina = kitchen). This mix of English and Spanish grammatical structures and words is what some researchers call “code-meshing” (which has also been studied in relation to Black English, Chinese, and other named languages and varieties).

Throughout the entire recipe, there are many more examples of what we can call “translingual” practices by which writers move across traditional understandings of separate languages. For example, under the words “spicy shrimp ceviche,” there is a Spanish word “aguachile” (literally “water and chile”), providing a bilingual title. In fact, the very same word “ceviche” is already a Spanish word first used in Perú but that might have originated from Quechua (an indigenous language from the Andes region) or/and another Spanish word (escabeche) with Arabic roots. If you do a Google search, you will realize that “ceviche” is already a commonly used word in English, and like the author of the recipe, because of its common use, it is not seen as “foreign.” The same happens with words like “taco” (Spanish), “sushi” (Japanese), “pasta carbonara” (Italian) or “croissant” (French).

How many times have you thought about all the words in English that come from other languages? English, like any other language, is inundated by “borrowings” or words taken from other languages. In fact, if you

search the “etymology” (origin) of any word in English, you will realize that it comes from somewhere else. If you are also a language nerd like me, you might be interested in checking up some words at the Online Etymology Dictionary.

Let me continue analyzing the recipe. Without going into too much detail, this recipe works for me since it reflects the kinds of literacies I am used to. Besides all the language practices it portrays (as explained above), the unit measurements are also “bilingual” since they appear in both the metric system (grams and milliliters, for example) and the imperial system (pounds and cups, in this recipe) and it includes a “cultural” note where the author explains what the meal means, how it is cooked in its place of origin, and ways of adapting it to taste. In addition, the way the information is arranged on the page, the use of color, different fonts, and formats makes it easy to read, and so, when I am cooking this meal, the recipe perfectly accomplishes the goal of walking me through the cooking process. The point is: the language practices of composing this recipe work and reflect the actual language and identity of many people in the US and beyond. What do these practices consist of then? Among others, these involve crossing the boundaries of single and separate languages in your writing activities, like having bilingual options, inserting words from other languages, adding notes to clarify cultural content, playing with the grammatical and lexical (vocabulary) structures of “standard forms” (like in “Claudia’s Cucina”) and playing with textual, visual, spatial forms of meaning-making. In general, these practices allow people to use their previous experiences in ways that are meaningful to them, without restricting their creativity and with a deep understanding of their writing goals and audience.

### FROM LANGUAGE MYTHS TO LANGUAGE IN TRANSLATION

As I mentioned earlier, if every word in English can be traced back to other languages, then every kind of writing can be considered “translingual.” Some scholars say that English is a language that is “always in translation” (Pennycook). What this means is that every time that we compose something, we have to “rethink” and “redo” previous language and composing practices, since no writing situation is like others. For example, you might have noticed that if you had to write a paper about a specific topic, present it to the class using a PowerPoint, and create a handout for your classmates, each of those times, you are “retelling” your paper, using different kinds of language, even if the audience is the same and even if you see yourself as a monolingual. As with the recipe, you might have to use technical words

or jargon from a specific field (that depending on the field, might come from other languages), so you might want to add a note to explain those expressions, or you might need visuals to clarify its meaning. Or, if you are a multilingual person, you might use expressions from other languages as you explain your topic and or your work to your audience.

Despite these common examples of translanguaging, the writing classroom in the US has always been shaped by two language myths: monolingualism and standard written language. Monolingualism in the writing classroom assumes that the goal is to teach everyone one single version of English. But this is unrealistic because, for starters, it overlooks the fact that most people in the US speak multiple languages or speak multiple varieties of English. Furthermore, it doesn't address the fact that assuming there is one "right" or "best" way to speak English privileges (and idealizes) certain varieties of English. In fact, as literacy educator April Baker-Bell explains, for many decades, the teaching and learning of composition has revolved around the idea of "standard American English" whose ideal speakers have been imagined as white native speakers of American English. So, who falls under that category and who doesn't? If we imagine our classrooms as monolingual spaces with white native speakers of English as the audience, the kinds of texts, approaches to studying them, and assessing them are specifically designed in ways that are marginalizing to other language demographics. I will get back to this later, but first, let me unpack the second language myth directly linked to monolingualism: standard language ideologies.

Rosina Lippi-Green, a sociolinguist, explains that the idea of "standard American English" is an artificial human construct used to establish hierarchies of language users. As a social construct, the concept of "standard American English" doesn't really exist beyond artificial examples used in textbooks and maybe machine recordings (like when you take the elevator and you hear the words "third floor" indicating where you have landed at). For example, even those who consider themselves "monolingual" speakers of English also have a diverse language inventory based on:

1. Dialects, geographical varieties of a language like "southern American English" or "Chicago English" (for instance, you might have heard that people in some areas of the US say "soda" whereas others say "pop" or "coke" based on where they've spent the majority of their lives);
2. Sociolects, which refer to all the social traits—often a combination of them, that inform language practices like "age," "profession,"

“ethnicity,” “gender,” etc. (For example, you might have noticed that your grandparents are not familiar with some of the expressions and words you use to communicate and that is, in part, due to the age gap);

3. Idiolects, unique language patterns that are distinctive from everyone else’s. Richard Nordquist uses a fictional example from the TV show *Parks and Recreation* to illustrate what idiolects are. He refers to what the character played by Aziz Ansari (Tom, in the show) says about his own language: “*Zerts* are what I call desserts. *Tray-trays* are entrees. I call sandwiches *sammies*, *sandoozles*, or *Adam Sandler*s. Air conditioners are *cool blasterz*, with a *z*. I don’t know where that came from.” As Tom humorously explains in the show, he has a unique way of using language based on his personality and other factors that he is even not aware of.

As a teacher of writing, I have talked about these two myths (monolingualism and standard language) with my students on many occasions, realizing that a view of language and writing beyond those myths does not just describe the practices of people like me, who are multilingual, but also of those who see themselves as monolingual. When language practices are understood beyond these myths, they are translingual (the language that you use can’t be 100% measured as belonging to one single language and one single modality). Most of the time, these conversations happen when we discuss types of writing like recipes, menus, posters, street or protest signs, songwriting, poems, infographics, comics, maps, social media, etc., which tend to offer opportunities for creativity, and thus, “non-normative” language practices.

As part of our discussions, the notions of “appropriateness” or “using proper language” always come up, too. There are situations, especially in academic contexts, where our interest in “appropriateness” may lead us to ignore the reality of language difference. But the truth is that language difference exists even in academic situations—as Pennycook explains, English is “always in translation.” What I have learned by talking to students and other colleagues about this, is that visually identifying “language difference” in actual writing seems to be very difficult because monolingualism and standard language ideologies are so stuck in our minds and in the material environments surrounding us (institutions, textbooks, journals, policies, etc.).

### WHAT ABOUT OTHER TYPES OF WRITING?

So why are examples about language difference often discussed in relation to pop-culture, but not discussed in relation to academic writing? As a researcher of language, I can tell you that language variation definitely exists in academic contexts and high stakes writing, even if we don't talk about it that often.

One of the examples of a prestigious writer using non-standard language in academic contexts comes from Vershawn Ashanti Young, who says

The narrow, prescriptive lens be messin writers and readers all the way up, cuz we all been taught to respect the dominant way to write, even if we dont, cant, or wont ever write that one way ourselves. That be hegemony. Internalized oppression. Linguistic self-hate. But we should be mo flexible, mo acceptin of language diversity, language expansion, and creative language usage from ourselves and from others both in formal and informal settings. (112)

Along with Young's work, I have known of other examples to support the ideas that writing, even in academic contexts, involves language difference, and that monolingualism and standard language views are myths that, nonetheless, are so pervasive, that we have built an academic world based on them. For example, take the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she describes her Chicana experiences with language difference as follows:

*Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente.* We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic *mestizaje*, the subject of your *burla*. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically *somos huérfanos*—we speak an orphan tongue. (80)

I am sharing these two examples with you, one from Black English and the other one from Chicax language practices, to illustrate what non-standard and translingual “formal” academic writing texts look like. These examples have been widely quoted and discussed in many other articles and studies, along with many other ones where there is explicit use of “linguistic” choices deemed “diverse” or “different.” They also demonstrate that using language difference in academic writing is not the opposite of “appropriateness.” There is a place for it, it just needs to be made (the space, I

mean). However, as mentioned earlier, these practices still “feel” marginal and anecdotal—especially in certain environments where dominant ideologies are very pervasive and populations seem more “homogenous.” The fact that Gloria Anzaldúa’s work from 1987 is still so relevant (34 years later) is very telling. Why is this? I know from experience, that, as I write, I am drawing on my Spanish, I take notes in different languages throughout the day, annotating the sources I use, leaving notes on post-its and recording audio notes in Spanish and English as I think through the ideas I want to write about, I translate, I rephrase, I purposefully code-mesh *estratégicamente* to make my point across. Do you have similar experiences? What are your writing activities like? Do you record or take notes and then use those initial ideas to compose more elaborate thoughts on paper? Do you change your wording according to feedback received from others? Do you look things up and find out alternative word choices? Do you avoid certain forms of language that you would use in other situations or do you incorporate them strategically? Are your audiences aware of the myths we talked about before? How do they react to them? Thinking through these questions is extremely important because all writers, and in particular, language minorities (those not imagined as white native speakers of monolingual and standard English) do a lot of this work, yet that work is not made visible in the learning of writing. Because those experiences are not talked about and writers are not encouraged to ask those questions, it is common for language minorities to just “accommodate” and disregard the wealthiness that comes with their language practices on the basis of “language appropriateness” in academic contexts.

### LOOKING AT RACISM AND THE CONDITIONS OF OUR ENVIRONMENTS

To answer the questions above and to fully embrace the complexities of language difference in writing, we need to dig deeper into why the myths I talked about before (monolingualism and standard language) are still so dominant in our academic communities, where making space for explicit language difference seems to still be rare. The quote below directly presents a call for action, that writers, teachers and students can no longer avoid:

Telling children that White Mainstream English is needed for survival can no longer be the answer, especially as we are witnessing Black people being mishandled, discriminated against, and

murdered while using White Mainstream English, and in some cases, before they even open their mouths. (Baker-Bell, 7)

Baker-Bell's quote speaks about how even when racial minorities conform to dominant language views and ideologies, they are still subject to the most extreme forms of racism. Rather than speaking about "standard" American English, Baker-Bell refers to this language ideal as "White mainstream English." She uses this term to emphasize the connection between language ideologies and racism, as a larger form of oppression. The quote above summarizes the relationship between language and racism. Even if some writers choose to accommodate to ideals of standard language, they will still experience racism. So, the question of whether the use of language difference in writing is appropriate or not isn't just a matter of language-knowledge, but a question of systemic racism. Systemic racism is "the overarching system of racial bias across institutions and society. These systems give privileges to white people resulting in disadvantages to people of color" ("Being Antiracist"). In fact, as Flores and Rosa say, "appropriateness-approaches" to language reproduce racism, since non-white individuals are asked to conform to standard language but, no matter what they sound like, they will continue to be seen as racially different and they will continue to experience oppression, as Baker-Bell clearly explains in the quote above. Therefore, as writers, we must approach language difference in more complex ways, since arguments about its use are not just linguistic. As a writer, you can consider ways to celebrate and integrate language difference in your writing. For example, when I write different articles, lesson plans, emails, or reports, I make intentional efforts to not limit my language practices on the basis of language myths. However, sometimes I am discouraged from using specific expressions, a direct translation from Spanish, abbreviations, emojis, etc. And when that happens, instead of merely blaming myself for not knowing the "correct" choice, I wonder: how much space for language difference is there in this type of writing? Are the audiences receptive to it? How much have the myths of monolingualism and standard language shaped the audiences' expectations for what is appropriate or not? What would happen if I decide to ignore the audience's preferences?

To answer these questions, it is useful to consider "bigger" issues, rather than just writers' language and writing capacities. If we think about language and writing as just skills and knowledge that we deploy to convey meaning, we will never fully understand the complexities of "language difference." Instead, we must look at the larger situations, ideologies, histories, and conditions that put us, writers, in a position to really be strate-



gically “linguistically diverse” in our writing on our own terms, not on the basis of “appropriateness,” “standard” language, and/or “monolingualism.” Most importantly, marginalized writers can realize that there is nothing wrong with them. While they have the same potential as any other writer, they have been placed in situations where other writers had language advantages. To acknowledge these issues, writers can reflect on questions related to the following:

1. Language myths (standard and monolingual views), especially those that put some writers at a disadvantage based on notions of “appropriateness,” and the history behind those beliefs, like “what ideologies surround this type of writing and how did those ideologies come to be?”
2. The lived and sensorial experiences of language practices, like “are you blaming yourself for your writing and language abilities or is there is something beyond your control at stake? How does a particular writing situation and the expectations attached to it make you feel as you try to use your knowledge?” For example, Gloria Anzaldúa expresses that the lack of recognition of her language is as if her tongue, the actual organ, was cut from her body.
3. The environments where you write and the material conditions in it, like “how do the textbooks, assignments, and readings for this class speak about language? Are they reflective of and welcoming of language difference in ethical ways or do they reinforce social hierarchies and racism”?

Now, let me clarify that, unfortunately, these questions will not automatically produce the “right” environment where all of a sudden and magically, we will all be able to make sense using everything we know, in whatever languages we choose to do so. That won’t happen. Undoing the biases and discriminatory ideologies that have shaped all human activity for centuries takes time and intentional collective efforts. But, at least, you will be better equipped to understand why it is that sometimes using jargon, code-meshing, and being creative with language beyond standard and monolingual norms is okay and other times it is not. And perhaps, by identifying how a specific writing requirement or situation makes you feel, you can find your way around it, or by realizing that the conditions under which you write are already putting some writers at a disadvantage, you might start a conversation and negotiate a solution to it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE IN COMPLEX AND EQUITABLE WAYS

How about your own writing practices, especially those that you do for a class? What can be done to embrace a more equitable approach to language? In what follows I offer some recommendations:

1. Think about writing as an activity not as a process or a product. By this, I mean: think about all that goes into composing something. For example, earlier I said that I speak to friends and colleagues about my writing, I do research, I take notes, record voice messages, draw maps, create outlines, rephrase, look words up, translate, etc. If I think about writing as just me sitting on my computer typing words in English and adapting to expectations, I am missing out on so many more things that I do that involve using my “diverse” language repertoire. Focusing on all the other extra things I do, allows me to see the wealth of experiences, skills, and knowledge I am using, and I can be more strategic about it.
2. Choose types of writing that create space for some language experimentation or creativity. If you think they do not allow for language difference, then ask your professor about it, clarifying your intentions and why using language difference is important to you. Identify strategies to negotiate its use, for example, by adding notes in parenthesis, translating, using images, etc. Find other texts where some of these strategies are used, analyze them, and build your own based on the examples you found.
3. When you are reading other writers’ work and you have to peer-review or peer-assess it, consider your own biases as you present your feedback. Think about questions like “why is it that I am asking the writer about that one expression? What does that say about my own language ideologies and understanding of ‘appropriateness’? Why would that expression stand out to me and other readers? In what ways is the type of writing itself discouraging the writer from using language difference? What am I learning that I don’t know about language from this writer?”

Responding to these questions about the genre I presented at the beginning of this essay seems fairly easy because the situation itself requires more explicit uses of language difference outside of traditional ways of thinking about language and writing. What about other situations where these

conversations are more marginal? Well, responding to the questions above can be part of your toolkit to understand why certain language practices and identities are (or are not) integral to any other kind of writing. They can also help to think about why all those writers who do not match the unreal expectations of standard and monolingual myths are othered when they think about their writing in traditional ways. If you are one of those writers, I hope this essay has contributed to affirming your practices and encourage you to strategically integrate them. Ultimately, our collective efforts will foster equitable approaches to the learning of writing.

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## TEACHER RESOURCES FOR BEYOND LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE IN WRITING: INVESTIGATING COMPLEX AND EQUITABLE LANGUAGE PRACTICES

Conversations about language difference and its relationship to writing are not just shaped by our own interests and practices, but are also determined by the space that is made or not for it in our teaching, programs, resources, etc. As a teacher, these are some activities that have contributed to making “space” in my own contexts for language difference in complex ways, despite surrounding dominant ideologies and requirements. To enable students’ self-inquiry processes about their own language practices, students can be asked to respond to the following activities:

1. Think about: what are some of the language myths you know? Have you ever been “corrected” based on your language practices? Have you ever corrected anyone? What do those “corrections” and “language myths” tell you about people’s language preferences and the ways society works?
2. Take a “language difference walk” on campus and document (observe and write down) how language practices change depending on the environment you are in (cafeteria, class, students’ building, gym, hallway, library, etc.), the modalities used in the genres (visuals, color, size, gestures, spatial arrangement, sound, etc.), the material used (paper, new technologies, chalk, spoken conversations), the people involved and their perceived identities, and any other factor you find relevant to those language practices. What does “language appropriateness” mean in each situation? Who defines it? Why? What counts as a successful language?
3. Document your language practices for a day across various genres (social media genres, email, text, posters, signs, writing for different classes, etc.), in different spaces and when different audiences are involved. What does “language appropriateness” mean in each situation? Who defines it? Why? What counts as successful language in those cases?
4. Share your notes with your peers and listen to theirs. In what ways do the language practices you documented differ from everyone else’s or not? What have you learned about language that you didn’t know before? How does the creative/ non-normative use of language make you all feel?