

# Translanguaging

## A view from the South

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### 1. Introduction

“Language changes every twelve miles” is a common saying in India. Hence, in Indian society, as across much of the multilingual globe, the flexible use of languaging resources together in day-to-day communication is as normal as it is common. Figure 1 provides a glimpse on this phenomenon from a primary classroom in rural Rajasthan (authors’ data):

T: थारे को कई कई animals पता है?	T: Which animals do you know?
S: Tiger, हाथी, बारहसिंगा, भालू,....	S: Tiger, elephant, deer, bear, ....
T: अच्छा, tiger कै रहे है?	T: Good, and where does the tiger live?
S: जंगल मे	S: In the jungle!

**Figure 1.** A translingual classroom interaction

Someone operating with a codeswitching mindset might try to identify the different codes (Mewadi, Hindi, and English) in this piece, assuming that these languages exist as different entities and are being mixed artificially or inappropriately. They ignore the fact that, for millennia, this has been the natural way to language, not only for this teacher and student, but also across Indian society, where an individual draws upon their entire linguistic repertoire for communication (also see Gupta, 2021). Translanguaging identifies, recognises, and respects this way of languaging and liberates the teacher’s classroom practices from the hegemony of “western linguistic and cultural suppositions” (Makoni & Pennycook, 2005, p.147).

In this brief response to Treffers-Daller’s opinion piece (2025), we offer a vision of translanguaging as a Southern practical theory of language, clarifying

important differences to codeswitching theory and touching on its importance for classroom learning and teaching as we do.

## 2. The scope of translanguaging

Pennycook and Makoni (2020) define the Global South as “the people, places, and ideas that have been left out of the grand narrative of modernity” (p.1). Adopting this definition, we see translanguaging as a challenge, principally from Southern scholars, practitioners and communities to the Northern frameworks and restrictions on languaging practices that continue to impact negatively on life and learning in classrooms across the world, long after the end of official colonialism. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, primary and secondary teachers and learners are today prohibited from using any languages other than English in all subject classrooms, despite extensive evidence that such practices, which deny access to learners’ home languages during education, are detrimental to literacy and learning across the curriculum (e.g., Simpson, 2019).

As observed by Treffers-Daller (2025), there are many scholars exploring a wide range of topics and issues under the broad shade of the translanguaging family tree. This extended family reflects the differences in practices and contexts where we live our multilingual lives. Yet, despite these differences, we share common understandings of translanguaging as the practice of accessing our entire linguistic and multimodal repertoires to maximise communication, including pedagogical approaches that foster such practices. This potentially includes *all* of the activity types mentioned by Treffers-Daller (p.4), and many more – the scope of translanguaging is still being explored. The fact that there are so many ways to translanguage merely reflects the fact that multilinguals engage in rich, complex communicative practices.

Nonetheless, the presence of shared ground among translanguaging scholars does not mean that there is universal agreement within the translanguaging family – after all, disagreement and debate are normal, healthy features of social and academic discourse. As such, we do not see translanguaging as a “terminological house with many rooms” (p.4) as suggested by Treffers-Daller, but as a tree with many branches, each supported by the core theory. This does not undermine translanguaging theory. It merely confirms its pluralistic nature.

### 3. Translanguaging and codeswitching

Treffers-Daller (2025) focuses a large section of her discussion on the similarities and differences between *codeswitching* and *translanguaging* theory, arguing that the latter is often attempting to displace the former. Yet the majority of translanguaging literature does not seek to invalidate work by scholars who prefer terms such as codeswitching (Li, 2018), rather it seeks to go beyond its limitations. By reconceptualising multilingual practices, translanguaging enables us to escape the seductive appeal of named languages as a basal construct to multilingual theories of language use. Ironically, as we read the multiple, beautiful and complex examples of languaging that Treffers-Daller provides in her attempts to validate codeswitching theory, we find ourselves more convinced (not less) of the validity of translanguaging to *better* explain all of these as a practical theory of language (Li, 2018). This is something that practitioners across the South and North have long needed (hence the popularity of translanguaging), but academia, perhaps in its desire to divide, codify and rule, had previously failed to provide.

In practice, there is little or no difference between examples of language use from the classroom described as codeswitching and translanguaging (although the latter goes beyond the former). The difference lies in how one views language and the aims of language learning. As Anderson (2024) notes, the basic linguistic philosophy of translanguaging theory is similar to that of integrationism in linguistics, where languaging and meaning-making is the first-order phenomenon, while codified languages are second-order phenomena (also see Li, 2018). Codeswitching assumes the existence of fixed codes (i.e., named languages) as *a priori* phenomena that are then analysed as mixed-code communication, paradoxically contradicting that which is at its foundations – the primacy of named languages. As such, it will always have difficulty in validating such practices, despite the best attempts of many codeswitching researchers. This misrepresentation may have grave consequences. It contributes, perhaps unwittingly, to the frequent reification of named languages into immutable and siloed canons in educational curricula. In our experience, this frequently impacts negatively on education in contexts across the Global South when authorities wrongly assume that Northern monolingual practices constitute ‘best practice’, and believe that copying them may lead to improved learning outcomes, as has happened in Andhra Pradesh. In contrast to this, translanguaging theory accommodates the Southern practices of flexible languaging to maximize communicative potential. It understands and validates the need to language (as verb) with our full linguistic repertoires. Hence, while the classroom practices described in code-switching and translanguaging research are often the same, differences in the underlying theories enable translanguaging theory to go further, in ways that may have important

implications, particularly for the most disadvantaged in society (see Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023).

It is clear that Treffers-Daller (2025) is keen to identify a delimited, easily measurable set of criteria for what is and what is not translanguaging. She seems to expect translanguaging to sit neatly within the boxes of the somewhat neo-positivist vision of language use and research that she conveys from her own work – the use of terminology such as “diagnostic criteria” (p.10), “[deriving] hypotheses” and “operationalisation” (p.6) reveals this. She seems either unable or unwilling to recognise that within dynamic complex system theories, constructs must often remain, by their very nature, flexible, elusive and ‘fuzzy’ to reflect the evolving, complex nature of language as social practice. It is precisely this neo-positivist desire to delimit, measure and classify that risks turning the live, organic, spatial phenomenon of languaging into the kind of lifeless, tightly classified, impoverished data that is so easily measured in Western science, yet, in the process, stripped of meaning.

#### 4. Valid points made by Treffers-Daller

There are some points made in Treffers-Daller’s (2025) article to which we are sympathetic, including her recognition of prior research on L1 use in the L2 classroom as useful. We also agree with her call for more research, firstly on the curricular impact of translanguaging to address important questions of how to balance between understanding and use in additional language classrooms in different contexts, and secondly on how to support translanguaging in classrooms where there are students from diverse first language backgrounds; see Mahapatra and Anderson’s *Languages for Learning* framework (2023) for potential solutions.

#### 5. Conclusion

The rapid evolution of translanguaging theory from its original conceptualisation to its current form offers evidence that this term has been widely accepted by teachers and scholars alike because of its power as a practical theory of language (Li, 2018), one that has clear implications for the classroom (Anderson, 2024). It has nothing to do with social media “market[ing]” any more than any other new theory in linguistics (of which there are a multitude). We encourage Treffers-Daller not to attempt to delimit it because of her own vested interest in codeswitching theory, but to join us in our quest to understand its scope, relevance and implications for teachers and learners in classrooms around the world.







## Competing interests

The authors declare none.

## Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the only data analysed in this article are available within the article.


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