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Translingual Communities: Teaching and Learning Where You Don't Know the Language

Elizabeth Kimball

In fields such as sociolinguistics and composition and rhetoric, communication is increasingly understood as translingual, that is, as negotiated socially across languages. Those of us engaged in community literacy can and should recognize the deeply multilingual nature of the communities in which we work, and we should understand, embrace, and forward the translingual approach. Here I reflect on my first conscious attempt to teach translingually in a college course with a community-based learning component. I present an overview of the translingual orientation, reflect on the decisions I made as I prepared a college community-based learning course with translingual intentions but not overt translingual objectives, and examine some the students' reflections that reveal their language attitudes at the end of the course. I argue that small, intentional decisions made towards a broader translingual orientation towards language and literacy make an immediate difference in how students think about language, and that those engaged in community literacy partnerships are in need of a theory of communication that the translingual approach can provide.

Keywords: community-based learning; translingual; language learning; Latino communities; college teaching; reflective practice; adult literacy

Introduction

Those of us who are engaged in community literacy, by virtue of the work we do, foster a belief in the possibility of communicating across a wide range of semiotic spheres. The artist in community does not only wish to create art for other artists, or art theorists, but for and with the community; the community theater collaborative generates dramatic works out of the concerns and voices of the community, not a select, well-heeled theater-going subculture. University-trained intellectuals working in collaboration with local citizens and organizations do not, at the end of the day, see talking only to other university-trained intellectuals as worthwhile. We believe that knowledge may be generated and shared across communities, rather than only within them.

We share this outlook as readers of *Community Literacy Journal*. Although we may not always refer to it directly, I suspect many of us talk about this boundary crossing in a shorthand kind of way, often using the expression of “speaking other languages.” We don’t really mean other languages, we think, but we know what we mean when we feel able to communicate easily with a particular person, group, or community. We might also be thinking of the different kinds of talk we move in and out of in the course of a day: in a religious service, we might feel comfortable speaking a language of God and the spirit; in a budget meeting, we would feel comfortable speaking a language of dollars and cents. Some of us might be good at code switching, taking on different dialects or styles of English, or even hybrid varieties like Spanglish, when we move from one community to another. We probably mean something closer to the specialized term “discourse communities” when we use the phrase “speaking a language” in this way, but nevertheless, it is the term “language” that we naturally turn to in an everyday sense. In other words, we often talk about languages figuratively, rather than literally.

But the figurative idea of language raises questions about the boundary between the figurative and the literal. What if this figurative understanding of the ability to speak other languages were also literally true? A truly egalitarian, pluralist democracy would require us to listen to one another well outside the borderlines of English, wouldn’t it? Could a fully realized community literacy be truly multilingual? Many linguists and literacy specialists, in recognition of the practices of people around the world, are beginning to argue that borders between languages are only imagined. This “translingual” understanding challenges the notion that languages constitute discrete systems, distinct from one another in grammar and vocabulary and, perhaps more significantly, in their alignment with cultures and nations.¹ Today, in linguistics and related fields such as composition and rhetoric, communication is increasingly understood as translingual, that is, as negotiated socially within and across languages in such a way as to discard the very notion of discrete, monolithic, grammar-based systems such as English or Spanish.

How might an understanding of a translingual approach aid us in the work of community literacy? I argue that attending to the translingual facets of communication as we engage university and community partners can bring about changes in attitude and ultimately in what we are able to accomplish together. But we need not make a complicated-sounding term like “the translingual approach” into a direct topic of discussion. Instead, we can pursue it indirectly, using familiar terms that people already understand. In the discussion that follows, I further explore what the concept means and how even monolingual people can participate in it. Then I reflect on how I did so in the context of a course I taught at my small liberal arts college, in which English monolingual college students came together in learning with Spanish-speaking community members. While I hope that this discussion is of practical use to others pursuing similar teaching situations, it should be understood more broadly as an argument for the reality of dialogue across languages of all sorts, and an introduction to a theory of communication that can improve community literacy practice.

Translingualism in Practice and in Attitude

Simply put, a translingual approach allows us “to consider all acts of communication and literacy as involving a shuttling between languages and a negotiation of diverse linguistic resources for situated construction of meaning” and “to treat communication as an alignment of words with many other semiotic resources involving different symbol systems (i.e., icons, images), modalities of communication (i.e., aural, oral, visual, and tactile channels), and ecologies (i.e., social and material contexts of communication)” (Canagarajah 2013, 1).² Translingualism is a practiced phenomena, and it can be observed in all kinds of settings, particularly sites around the world where languages come in contact, such as national borders, postcolonial nations, and cultures that harbor a diversity of indigenous local languages: in any kind of contact zone. It is not exclusively associated with multilingual regions, but it is a theory that grows out of those kinds of places: Gloria Anzaldúa’s writing, for example, can be considered translingual, because it draws on English and Spanish, and hybrid varieties, for rhetorical power. Translingual practice is also observable in online venues in which people must negotiate with a broader range of linguistic possibility than in their local material worlds, and thus is practiced by those who would otherwise consider themselves monolingual, such as monolingual suburban American teenagers (Canagarajah 2013, 5, citing Williams 2009). To communicate translingually is to adopt a variety of creative strategies to communicate in the absence of shared linguistic structures. For instance, translingualists enjoy what Firth calls the “let it pass principle,” simply ignoring grammatical oddities and lapses in understanding in favor of getting the sense and intention of the message over time. In other words, anybody has the capacity for translingual communication, regardless of his or her language background or so-called bilingual or multilingual proficiency—themselves terms that are debunked by the translingual approach, as they invoke a monolingual proficiency in more than one language.

But besides an observable practice, a translingual approach is also an orientation to language that may be studied, reflected on, and adopted by those of us who speak and write from monolingualist legacies.³ In that sense, a translingual approach does for language what theories of white privilege do for race: it helps those of us who enjoy privilege recognize that we possess it; and it makes race, or in this case language, a thing that is owned by everyone rather than an add-on category to a core version of humanity, an unmarked version that only the privileged can be. While we cannot stop being the race that we are, given race’s reification in culture, we can reconsider what it means to have been “born” one race or another, and, over the years, to adjust the way we interact with the world accordingly.⁴ Likewise, we can begin adopting a translingual attitude even before we acquire increased creativity and flexibility in using linguistic codes, before we become more multilingual and less monolingual. For instance, we can begin working with the questions put forth by Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur: “When faced with difference in language, this approach asks: What might this difference do? How might it function expressively, rhetorically, and communicatively? For whom, under what conditions, and how?” (303-304). We can drop the question that we are

accustomed to asking: does this person speak English like I do?

A translingual approach, then, contributes a usable theory of communication to pedagogical movements in experiential learning and community and critical literacy. These movements represent attempts to create partnerships that are more just and egalitarian. A translingual approach helps us because community literacy compels us to engage, and it offers us a means to do so, in places where so-called Standard English, or indeed any kind of English, is not spoken. If language and literacy in all its forms, both linguistic and more broadly semiotic, are understood not as residing in individuals but in the act of creative negotiation of meaning, then we have a tool with which to discard inherited hierarchies of the literate and non-literate, and the (native) English-speaking and non (native)-English speaking, as well as, for example, the artist and non-artist, or the academic and non-academic. This understanding is particularly important in many university-community partnerships in diverse communities, where we want to connect despite language difference. I have been thinking about this issue a great deal as I teach in an English department and work to get my students thinking about language and meaning in the community: a community that is, in fact, Spanish-speaking. Should I leave that partnership work to the Spanish department? I don't think so. I want my students to act translingually, even if they don't know Spanish.

Consider how the translingual approach enriches the work that has been done in university-community literacy partnerships. Adopting the guidelines for "promoting productive learning for all involved," Eli Goldblatt's adaptation of Saul Alinsky's organizing model for university-community partnerships, a translingual approach could, for example "respect people's dignity by creating the conditions for them to be active participants in solving their own problems rather than victims or mere recipients of aid" (320). A translingual attitude would mean that being an "active participant" means communicating as a speaker who has full command of language rather than limited command of the "target" language. Similarly, to "draw on the inevitability of class and group conflict as well as the unpredictability of events for your creativity to invent tactics that fit the moment" (320) would be to draw on the widest possible range of communicative resources, setting aside concerns for cognitive access to the textbook grammar construction or the best word. It would be to invent *language* that fits the moment. And as I argue here, "try to see every situation in as stark a light as possible, unblurred by ideological imperatives, traditional hatreds, or conventional moralities" (320). Horner, Trimbur, Lu, Royster and the others who have termed the translingual approach have done so in such a way to help us avoid falling into another -ism. They write, "while increasing one's linguistic resources is always beneficial, taking a translingual approach is not about the number of languages, or language varieties, one can claim to know. Rather, it is about the disposition of openness and inquiry that people take toward language and language differences" (311). I am not merely advocating multilingualism but rather a particular "disposition" that allows us to encounter the profound reality of language difference as meaningfully as we in community literacy have tried to encounter the profound realities of difference in race, class, education, gender, and the like.

Teaching with a Translingual Attitude

The trouble with working in communities of language difference is that people do, for good and practical reasons, understand languages as distinct. The language barrier is, for most Americans, a real and objective thing. My students would be no different. I knew that I needed to recruit students for the course using language they could understand, and then I would wait and see how much of a translingual approach I could introduce in time. The students would be serving as volunteer tutors and conversation partners in an evening ESOL course at a local community center, and many of the community students would know little English. The community students would come from the local Latino/a population, immigrants of a range of literacy and class backgrounds from Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, and Peru. We wanted to shift the relationship from tutor-student to partners on as level ground as possible, which we would enable by involving everyone in a bilingual oral history project. The college students would collect oral histories from the community students, transcribe them, and then edit and revise them collectively with the community students. We would collect the documents into a printed book for all to have as a keepsake of the experience. Without extensive preparation in TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Other Language), or with any Spanish of their own, or with a class carefully prepared by a professional ESL teacher, could my English monolingual students contribute all that much?

I believed that they could. But I knew that I could not force the idea on them. With all the other moving parts to manage in a community-based learning course, I would not think of suggesting to my students that their English monolingualism, and the community members' Spanish monolingualism, would not be a challenge. Nor would I think of specializing the course content to such a degree that the study of translingual practice, still being investigated at the research level, would be the main content of a sophomore-level general education course, with a host of learning outcomes to achieve (it was both a designated community-based learning course as well as writing intensive).

But I did want to introduce students to theories about literacy and language, and to debunk myths about immigrants and literacy, the ease of English language learning, and English-only ideologies. We would also be running our course in the same time slot as a course in Spanish taught by my friend and colleague Elise DuBord, and her students would be participating in the same evening ESOL classes. Thus, we would have people coming together one evening a week from three different literacy and language cultures: English-speaking college students, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking college students, and Spanish-speaking community members—although such labels do little to explain the diversity of language and literacy backgrounds, nor of their current status as language learners. No two kinds of language proficiency, language variety, literacy, or experience would be shared. I wanted my own students to start thinking translingually, and then acting translingually as best as they could, even though I knew they would not become speakers of Spanish in a few short hours in an off-campus experience. The three leaders of the project—the education coordinator at the local community center, my colleague in the Spanish department, and I got together and

planned an oral history project that would enable all the members of the community to work together towards a common goal: a bilingual book that everyone would be able to take home as a document and keepsake of the experience. That way, we would begin to erase the notions of language experts and novices, and the hierarchies that that entails.

I called the course “Community Language and Literacy” and framed out its motivating questions in as friendly language as I could. Here’s the text from a flyer I posted around campus:

ENGL 219 001 Community Language and Literacy

Prof. Elizabeth Kimball MW 10:40AM-11:55AM
Students must also be available Tues or Thurs 7-9PM

Community Language and Literacy explores how people learn about language and learn to read. You'll learn about

- The range of programs and curricula for teaching literacy in the community
- How to tutor and work with language learners
- How linguistic ideologies affect our practices in teaching literacy

Alongside classroom work, you will serve as a tutor in an evening course in English as a Second Language offered at Morristown Neighborhood House, and participate in a community-wide project to record literacy and immigration stories of participants.

This class is a special course that may not be offered again!

Build your resume...connect with people in a bilingual environment...be an active learner!

Students must choose one “lab” section per week, Tuesday or Thursday evenings from 7-9 pm, and allow time in their schedules to get to Morristown. Gen Ed: WRIT (writing intensive), OFEC

Questions? Contact me...Liz Kimball...lkimball@drew.edu

figure 1. flyer for Community Language and Literacy course

I wanted to explain the content and the activities in words that my students would not only understand, but get excited about. It was not for me to critique the monolingualist assumptions in the English-language classes for adults, nor could I pretend that a student would not take this class merely for a better chance at getting a job once out of college, or to get the off-campus credit he or she needed to graduate. Instead, I tried to build on these familiar motivations and work into them some translingualist approaches:

- I used the word “bilingual,” even though it is ideologically distinct from a translingual approach, and emphasized that the off-campus component would be an exciting challenge to work with people who don’t share the same language proficiency in English. I talked about how we would learn from our own struggles to communicate just as the English-language learners would, and that we all had the capacity to connect

with others. In my vocabulary, then, I approached translanguaging indirectly, “slant,” as Emily Dickinson might have said. I just wanted students to find the courage to go where English is not dominant, and then to find out what comes next.

- I talked up the oral history project we had planned, which also drew a number of students who saw themselves as writers, or who expressed interest in narrative. This exercise, in which my English students, my colleague’s college Spanish students, and the community center’s adult students worked together to record and translate the community students’ life stories, was the most translanguaging experience of the semester, in that language as a mode of communication (rather than a subject of study) was brought into the foreground as the participants crafted interview questions, listened, talked, transcribed, translated, and edited the stories. Participants were acting translanguagingly, even if they did not know it.

- I emphasized how students were building professional skills. We brought in a TESOL specialist to give students strategies for working as language tutors, emphasizing that TESOL is a professional field with career opportunities they might consider. We also held regular reflective discussions to talk about how events were playing out at the center: how should student volunteers understand their relationship to adult community volunteers? What kind of agency could a college volunteer seize in planning lessons or taking charge in a tutoring session? How did you find ways to communicate something without having the exact words you wanted? These discussions, I hope, fostered an awareness of ways of being in civic, professional, and cross-cultural settings, and since the translanguaging approach recognizes that language is embedded in social and bodily ways of being, I think I can claim that at least, the spirit of the translanguaging approach was honored.

But could students really buy into the core of the translanguaging approach, this radical idea that language barriers are only imaginary? That core concept, I realized as the semester went on, makes everything else possible: it frees us to do that collaborative work, which in this case took the form of language learning and the producing of written texts. Eventually I broached the subject in several class periods of reading discussion in the latter half of the semester. I continued to take an indirect approach: rather than assigning readings about translanguaging that were likely too specialized for undergraduate general education students, I assigned a selection of personal language memoirs, all of them favorites of many an undergraduate anthology: Amy Tan’s “Mother Tongue,” Malcolm X’s “Learning to Read” from his *Autobiography*, Sandra Cisneros’ “Only Daughter,” an excerpt from Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*, and for its political significance and rhetorical complexity, Gloria Anzaldúa’s “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” After a month or two of readings in sociolinguistics and the history of literacy, these first-person narratives were welcome by all of us.

Eventually we reached a level of understanding that let me ask a question of application and significance: if we often talk about a language barrier, and we envision that barrier as a tall, solid wall between one language and another, how do each of these

authors seem to resist, work around, or reinvent that metaphor? I drew a wall on the board and let students think about representations of the language barrier. Soon, they began generating ideas: you can fly over a wall, like a bird; you can dig under it, like a prisoner; you can blast a hole in it, like a radical activist. I pushed them to link these images to the metaphors that seem implied by each author. Here is a picture of what resulted:

figure 2.

I was delighted. Still, my students accepted the wall image without comment. Their metaphors overcame the barrier, but the barrier still existed, suggesting that overcoming was something to be done only by individuals, and creative, hard-working ones at that, like the talented people who wrote these narratives. What about their own ordinary U.S. monolingual selves? For them, other languages would remain on the other side of a high, thick wall. They would not learn Spanish well enough, at least not in this setting, to really talk in-depth with the community participants.

Keeping what I had learned about a translingual approach in mind, I proposed an alternative: what if we thought about languages as oceans? We can draw a line on the ground to separate the U.S. from Mexico, and with English from Spanish. But where does the North Atlantic end and the South Atlantic begin? At what point is the Atlantic Ocean the New York harbor or the Chesapeake Bay? Is the water in one part markedly different from the water in the other part?

figure 3.

Thinking about this kind of metaphor for language was hard for my students, and I can understand why because I too am a monolingual U.S. citizen, albeit one who has tried to overcome that inheritance. If languages were the same, it would not be so hard to learn a new one, and it would not be so hard to communicate with others who do not speak the same language, or at least not to degree that the speaker does. The absence of detail in my visual metaphor of the ocean reflects the relative absence of verbal response to my idea.

Translingual Thinking in Student Reflections

While I was not interested in indoctrinating students in a translingual attitude, then, nor did I introduce the concept until the very end of the course, I did hope that all our careful planning of collaborative literacy in the community would lead to students' being more thoughtful about what language and literacy are and how they mediate both everyday interactions and broader cultural hierarchies. In collaboration with my colleague in Spanish, we designed a series of prompts for reflection essays that would be assigned to both of our classes at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. While I cannot proffer a complete assessment within the confines of this article, I discerned a pattern of responses upon reading the complete set of reflection essays that were written at the conclusion of the course.

I divide the responses into two categories. The first is students' sensitivity toward language learning. I wanted to know how students thought about language itself and language learning; did the course and the community experience help them to develop complex views of language, and of the people who try to acquire language as adults? While my course focused explicitly on this topic—one of our course texts was Ana Celia Zentella's *Building on Strength: Language and Literacy in Latino Families and Communities*—my colleague's did not; her course examined the immigrant experience. What we found, then, is that while my students found more language for describing language, because that's what we'd been reading and writing about semester, both groups of students developed sensitivity to, and respect for, the enormous undertaking of becoming bilingual in adulthood. Students displayed awareness of language as a symbolic system rather than a transparent reflection of reality; they recognized that it encompassed more than grammatical fixity; and they revealed their own willingness to "go with the flow":

Here are some of the words of students:

Within the ESOL classes at Neighborhood House, I have learned that people need support while language learning, that most language learners have complicated histories, and for me to use the language barrier to my advantage while volunteering at the neighborhood house.

This student recognizes that learning language is not simply a matter of acquiring a set of facts about a language and applying them, and suggests that the support that people need is inherent to the cognitive and social complexity of the task, rather than a sign of deficit or weakness on the part of the learner. Evoking our reading of Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*, the student recognizes the layered nature of personal history, with language, literacy, and emotions that shape the present learning situation.

We see that kind of awareness also among my colleague's students writing in Spanish:

Yo aprendí de las luchas de los estudiantes trabajando con migo y de los estudiantes que estaban aprendiendo. Mis compañeros me abrieron los ojos de ver la realidad que la barrera de idioma que existe para los estudiantes de ESOL también existe para muchos americanos que solamente hablan un idioma y que hay un paralelo: sin la capacidad de comunicarse a veces se sienten sin poder.

Whether or not language and literacy practices were made explicit in course content, then, the experience of working in the ESOL course foregrounded the disconnect between status and English-language proficiency, and the possibility of language performance to garner enormous power.

The second category that I discovered is students' engagement with translingual practice, or working creatively across languages to create meaning. Because my

students didn't generally speak much Spanish, they needed accommodation from the Spanish-speaking college students who moved more easily between the two worlds. Their English monolingualism, while giving them special status in the broader U.S. economy,⁵ put them in a deficit in our specially devised speech community. But in the reflections, the English monolingual students displayed a remarkable flexibility with communication. Perhaps it was by *not* having Spanish at the tips of their tongues that their communicative creativity blossomed. For example,

I realized that talking isn't the only way of communicating. During the time at Neighborhood House, communication was in English, Spanish and sometimes even through pictures and facial expressions. The little Spanish I knew proved to be assistance in communication but sometimes honestly my Spanish and my ESOL student Linda's English weren't enough to help us other understand each other all the time. The language difference allowed for a door to be open which allowed me to learn Spanish from them as I help them learn English.

I was touched to see this student still grappling with the metaphor of the language barrier that we had puzzled over in class. By the time he was writing his final reflection essay, this student has totally erased the idea of the wall: now, a language is a door that can be opened and closed. When it is open, meaning can pass through in *any* language. The student has transcended his monolingual assumptions, the ones that most of us inherit: that one speaks only in one language or another; that full fluency is the optimal state for communication; that teacher passes knowledge on to learner. Several students described how their English monolingualism became more obvious when it came time to do the oral history project, and yet the same students described a feeling like this one:

My interviewee felt more comfortable speaking Spanish the entire interview. Being a monolingual student myself, I was unable to hear his story until it was later translated for me. Although I did not get to hear the story from him first hand, as I was reading the transcript I felt as if I knew what he had been saying all along.

This student's idea that "I knew what he was saying all along" is idealistic, perhaps, at least in a literal sense: he could not have translated what his oral history partner was saying. If it were a proficiency test, he would have failed it. However, his feeling speaks to the underlying spirit of the translingual approach, a feeling that fundamentally we are communicating out of our shared humanity, and that we all have equal access to language and to truth.

What I think is emerging in these student reflections, then, is a more sophisticated view of language, moving from the simple idea of language as a school subject or a self-evident marker of cultural identity to a complex idea of language and literacy as

emerging from history, involving layers of personal experience, and most significantly, existing within communities, rather than within individuals. Language is not a thing that is contained within the brain of one person: it exists *only* when people use it to communicate, in semantic, symbolic, even bodily ways. That notion has profound significance when we consider the ethical implications of community-based learning and community literacy work.

Conclusions

When students and community partners have the opportunity to learn together, whether that learning is happening around the acquisition of Spanish or English, or learning about the immigrant experience or creating written texts together, they can begin to acquire a metalinguistic awareness of what language is, how it works, and how it can be theirs to use and enjoy. Elise refers often to the notion of *confianza*, a kind of interpersonal trust and understanding that can't easily be translated to English. *Confianza* allows learning and collaboration to take place; in my mind, it allows for linguistic creativity. Without it, the literacy community that we set up, where no two people share exactly the same language and literacy history, would not have been possible.

I am not suggesting that notions of language proficiency will not be with us, in ways that will be defended as useful and necessary, for a long time to come.⁶ However, if we put proficiency concerns first, community literacy would never be possible. Proficiency keeps us working in what Goldblatt calls a “throughput” model of educational work, in which “[w]e move students along a path marked by diplomas and certificates, occupy them with reading and writing tasks, determine their achievements with tests or papers” (315). Community students who come to the ESOL class have hopes for increased English-language proficiency that parallel the college students’ desires for the valuable credential of service learning. However, within the translingual setting itself, the proficiency model may be set aside. No one is getting graded; no one will take a test at the end. The goal is to communicate, to create texts together. What we accomplished was memorable: students seemed to become more flexible, open, courageous participants in a community endeavor to learn language. In collaboration with the community students, they created written texts that will be saved and reread. They began to understand that commonplaces about the need for immigrants to learn English are driven as much by ideologies—changeable ones—as by apparently practical need. And they put language in a broader understanding of literacy sponsorship (Brandt 2001, 17-22) and the mechanisms that welcome some of us in to full membership in democracy while leaving others out. As teachers, we can aid the process of becoming translingual not through indoctrination but through careful planning and collaboration, an openness to student attitudes towards language, and a conviction that communication takes place across boundaries every day. I am all the more convinced that a translingual approach to communication will go a long ways in the broader work of the community literacy, showing us in real, literal terms how we can create meaning and make things happen across a range of settings and languages, even those far from the centers of English.

Endnotes

1. "The concept of language as a rigid, monolithic structure is false, even if it has proved to be a useful fiction in the development of linguistics." Einar Ingvald Haugen, *The Ecology of Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972), 325. See also Canagarajah 2007.
2. As an approach, translingualism has developed in research areas such as global Englishes (Pennycook, Blommaert, Canagarajah), education (García and Kleifgen, Jerskey), and applied linguistics and TESOL (Silva and Matsuda, Pavlenko, Fernández Dobao). It is gaining rapid recognition in rhetoric and composition (Donahue; Horner, Lu, and Matsuda, eds. 2010; Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur 2011; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue 2011; Canagarajah ed. 2013).
3. See especially Horner, Jones, Royster, and Trimbur, as well as Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue
4. See Macintosh
5. See Kramsch.
6. See especially Atkinson et al.

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