



Title	Translanguaging : Evidence from Nairobi and Its Social Contribution
Author(s)	Yamamoto, Mio
Citation	The University of Osaka – Tongji University Joint International and Interdisciplinary Forum: Toward the Integration of Society and Knowledge Official Forum Proceedings. 2026, p. 57–69
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/104124
rights	
Note	

The University of Osaka Institutional Knowledge Archive : OUKA

<https://ir.library.osaka-u.ac.jp/>

The University of Osaka

Translanguaging: Evidence from Nairobi and Its Social Contribution

Mio Yamamoto
The University of Osaka, Japan

The University of Osaka - Tongji University
Joint International and Interdisciplinary Forum:
Toward the Integration of Society and Knowledge
Official Forum Proceedings

Abstract

Nairobi, the capital city of the Republic of Kenya, is a multilingual city where people speak diverse languages such as Swahili, English, and ethnic languages. In Nairobi, speakers do not necessarily distinguish linguistic resources based on the “names” of languages such as “Swahili” or “English” when making meanings. Instead, they can develop their own way of speaking by using the full range of their repertoire inclusively. To explain this sort of language practice, the concept of *translanguaging* has been gaining academic attention. Translanguaging refers to multilinguals’ practice of constructing and drawing an inherently multilingual linguistic repertoire for meaning-making, without strictly adhering to the socially and politically determined boundaries. Although translanguaging originated in Bilingual education, it has been increasingly used as a framework to comprehend multilinguals’ everyday language practices. This article aims to articulate everyday language practices in Nairobi, employing translanguaging as an analytical grid. In addition, it addresses the social contribution of revealing everyday multilingual practices.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Language practice, Kenya

1. Introduction

Approximately 42 languages are spoken in the Republic of Kenya (Dwivedi, 2014). Specifically, urban areas, such as Nairobi, experience a multilingual environment where people speak Swahili and English as official languages, as well as diverse ethnic languages. Speakers communicate with one another using various linguistic resources. A survey of 935 residents in Nairobi revealed 41 languages as mother tongues, with the average number of languages spoken by an individual being three (Githiora, 2018).

Although people occasionally entirely “switch” between languages based on the situation or interlocutor, instances of blending diverse language within a single utterance are also observable, as illustrated below:

(1)

...“Si unisaidie simu yako *nicall* huyu jamaa ananitumia pesa, ndio tuweze kulipa hii *shopping* yako”. Dem si amem*trust* wamekuwa wakiongea *for like two months*...

“(The con man said to a target girl) ‘Could you assist me by allowing me to use your phone to *call* one man who will send me money, then we can pay for your *shopping* expenses.’ The girl *trusted* him (because) they had been communicating *for like two months*...”

This statement, recorded in Nairobi, highlights English words are italicized¹ while the remaining part is in Swahili. This example illustrates the practice of integrating diverse linguistic resources within a single utterance. This kind of speech is frequently observed in everyday conversation in Nairobi. In this article, “everyday” refers to a context devoid of social pressure to use single language exclusively, wherein conversational participants share several repertoires. Unlike formal contexts such as a presidential address, individuals pay less attention to their language choice in everyday communication among friends or family, resulting in more fluid practices that draw on diverse linguistic resources similar to (1).

Translanguaging serves as a framework to capture the practice of using various linguistic resources dynamically. Translanguaging denotes “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (usually national and state) languages” (Otheguy et al., 2015). Otheguy et al.(2015) began by arguing that we cannot determine boundaries between “(named) languages” purely based on linguistic features such as lexicon or structure; rather, they are social constructs that are determined arbitrarily. Following this, they argue that such socially labelled “languages” differ from an *idiolect*, which refers to a speaker’s own linguistic system, including lexical and grammatical features that emerge in interaction with other speakers

(Otheguy et al., 2015). Namely, from the perspective of multilinguals who possess diverse repertoires, their own meaning-making system is not divided along socially determined boundaries; rather, it is composed of all linguistic resources they have inclusively. Building on this premise, Otheguy et al.(2015) claim that translanguaging refers to the practice of making meaning by utilizing the full range of linguistic resources without adhering to boundaries.

Translanguaging, initially a pedagogical approach in bilingual education, has been further developed by multiple scholars as a framework to comprehend multilingual speakers' language practice (e.g., García & Li, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). Moreover, the study of translanguaging has advanced toward the multimodal conceptualization of human language practices, including all semiotic signs, such as writing, gestures, and pictures (Li Wei, 2018). In parallel, translanguaging has been employed to investigate everyday language practices in multilingual contexts globally, including Africa, Asia and Oceania (Li Wei, 2011; Räisänen, 2018; Vaughan, 2018). These studies focus on the dynamic language practices of individual (multilingual) speakers that transcend socially determined boundaries and creatively utilize their diverse linguistic resources.

Translanguaging can also be used to elucidate the language practices in Nairobi. Githiora (2018) argues that the language practices across Kenya can be characterized as translanguaging. Additionally, Gibson et al. (2024) assert that most Kenyan people regularly “use Swahili, another Kenyan language, and English on a regular basis in a broad range of domains in a fluid manner, often without clear boundaries between discrete codes in ways that have been described more widely as translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Li, 2014; Williams, 1994)”. However, the studies do not provide clear explanations, supported by concrete examples, of what kinds of practices in Nairobi or Kenya, as a whole, constitute translanguaging.

Therefore, this article aims to delineate the aspects of language practices in Nairobi that can be considered translanguaging, by presenting data from naturally occurring speech gathered in the “Eastlands” area of Nairobi. In the analysis, translanguaging is defined as “the practice of employing full linguistic resources to make meanings, by transcending the socially determined boundaries of named languages.”

In addition, this article addresses its social contribution. In multilingual contexts, including Nairobi, a disparity frequently exists between the educational language policy and everyday language practice. This article posits that translanguaging can capture such a reality by articulating everyday practices of people in Nairobi.

2. Data overview

This study's data comprises naturally occurring conversations among 26 individuals from Umoja and Kariobangi districts, located in the eastern region of Nairobi city called "Eastlands." Tables 1 and 2 present their detailed breakdown. Language names reported as "language(s) I can speak" were Swahili, English, Sheng², Luo, Kikuyu, Kamba, Luhya and others³, in order of frequency.

age	number
20s	15
30s	3
40s	6
50s	2
total	26

Table 1:
Age distribution of
participants

gender	number
female	13
male	13
total	26

Table 2:
Gender distribution
of participants

This study examines everyday language practice in which the speakers do not pay much attention to their language choice. To minimize their sense of "being monitored," recording sessions were held outside one participant's residence or at a church they frequently attend for praying. Furthermore, participants were requested to invite their own friends, resulting in conversation groups consisting of two to six people who are close friends or acquaintances. Each session lasts 20 to 60 minutes, resulting in approximately five hours of recorded material and its transcription.

3. Analysis

This chapter examines everyday language practices in Nairobi through the lens of translanguaging. Section 3.1. illustrates that speakers in Nairobi often do not pay attention to the socially determined boundaries of languages in everyday conversation. Section 3.2. further exemplifies their vibrant meaning-making practices through the employment of their full linguistic resources.

3.1. Practices that overlook the boundaries

This section emphasizes that they do not strictly conform to the boundaries of the named languages. In the conversations in Nairobi, speakers often render them irrelevant to the act of communication. Let us examine the exemplary instances below.

(2)

(3)

changed twice within a short period; however, there was no indication of any communication disruption, such as inquiries regarding the meaning of *pride* or hesitation following speaker B's utterance using *pride*.

The examples above illustrate the practices they use to utilize their repertoire without paying attention to the socially determined boundaries of named languages. In the area, speakers have both “Swahili” and “English” words as their linguistic resources at the same entry, and there are situations/norms that allow them to choose them without any difference in meaning.

3.2. Practices to create original expression by integrating resources

This section emphasizes the practices through which speakers create their own expressions by integrating their diverse linguistic resources. According to Otheguy et al. (2015), a person's unique language system, or idiolect, comprises a collection of lexical and structural features that are acquired through interaction with others. Multilinguals construct it in a way that intertwines various named languages, rendering the system incapable of being entirely separated based on the language name. In the following parts, this analysis will examine how speakers in Nairobi interweave multiple named languages into a cohesive system of their own.

Firstly, it will examine an example that indicates the integrated part of their idiolect, focusing on structures or grammars from several named languages. (4) shows the fusion of Swahili and English structure within the speaker's own system.

(4)

- a. A-me-toka kwa background simple.
 SM3SG-PRF-come from background simple
 “She came from a simple background (a poor family).”

- b. Wa-na-imb-a genres different.
 SM3PL-PRF-sing genres different
 “They sing different genres.”

- c. U-me-on-a hiyo ni con ingine calculated!
 SM2SG-PRF-see-FV that COP con another calculated
 “You see, that is another calculated conning!”

In Swahili, a noun is typically followed by modifier, whereas in English, a modifier precedes the noun. Considering the underlined part in (4a), the modifier *simple* and the noun *background* are both English words, but their arrangement follows Swahili syntax. If the

Swahili and English systems were entirely distinct in the speaker's idiolect, those two words would be processed only within the English system, which would result in a *simple background*. However, the speaker produced the expression following Swahili syntax without hesitation. Similarly, in (4b), the English words *genres* and *different* follow Swahili syntax in the same way as (4a). In (4c), a more complex integration can be observed. The speaker interweaves English words *con* and *calculated*, with a Swahili modifier *ingine* "another" under Swahili syntactic structure, resulting in *con ingine calculated*. These examples indicate a fusion or interwoven element within the speaker's idiolect. It is also important to note that the phrase *simple background* in (4a) carries a local meaning of "a poor background/family". This illustrates how they have incorporated these words as available resources for meaning-making, and have developed the conventionalized meaning through their use, rather than simply "borrowing" the English words as they are.

The next aspect will present examples that illustrate the speaker's creativity stemming from the integrated part of their system. In (5), the speaker creates his own expression (which is comprehensible to others) by integrating resources from Swahili and English. He is discussing decorated buses called "matatu" operating in Nairobi city.

(5)

I-li-kuw-a	i-na-kaa	<u>orange-orange.</u>
SM9-PAST-be-FV	SM9-PRS-stay	orange-like

"That (bus) was partly orange/orange-like color."

The matatu bus referenced was basically orange, though not entirely, as its sides were embellished with diverse and colorful graffiti. To convey the meaning "partly orange/orange-like," he fused the Swahili repetition system and the word *orange* to create the expression *orange-orange*. In Swahili, repetition of adjectives, verbs and nouns adds various meanings, such as plurality, emphasis, or reduction to the original meaning (Ashton, 1947). In this utterance, the speaker utilized the function "to reduce the strength of the word." This function, for instance, is utilized for the expression (6) below:

(6)

Kiwanja	ki-li-kuw-a	maji-maji	(Ashton, 1947: 316, Glosses are by the author)
ground	SM7SG-PAST-be-FV	wet (maji=water)	

"The ground was wet."

(6) expresses the state of a sports ground that is not entirely soaked, but wet to some extent, by repeating *maji* "water" to create the impression of the adjective "wet." In this example, the meaning of *maji* "water" is attenuated through repetition, yielding the meaning "wet". Similarly, the speaker in (5) depicted the way orange color was partially visible or invisible

Besides the case of (5), there is also the practice of creatively expressing nuance by merging lexical items from other named languages with the affixes of the Bantu languages, to which Swahili belongs. In (7a,b), the speakers employ the prefix *ka-*, which is frequently utilized in colloquial Swahili or other Bantu languages, as a resource. The prefix *ka-* serves a function known as “diminution,” imparting a nuance of “small” to a noun. For example, the Swahili word *mtoto* “child”, which comprises prefix *m-* (class 1⁴ prefix) and noun stem *-toto*, can be changed to *katoto*, which means “small child,” by altering the prefix to *ka-*. The speakers in (7a,b) create the new expression by using this prefix with English words:

“Why should I go alone and sit like a first grade student of secondary (sitting alone and lonely)?”

"He said that, well, he had searched for a young and cute side chick."

As demonstrated in the section 3.2., practices that generate new and unique expression by utilizing and interweaving available linguistic resources indicate the fused part within each speaker's idiolect.

The utterances shown in chapter 3 exemplify the practice of utilizing full linguistic resources to make meanings, transcending the socially determined boundaries of named languages: translanguaging. These instances illustrate that speakers often neglect the label of named languages in their everyday language practices in Nairobi. Furthermore, they can formulate

expressions that most effectively communicate their intentions and are appropriate for the context by fully leveraging their individual idiolects.

However, we must acknowledge that they cannot engage in those fluid, creative practices anytime and in any context. For example, during a group session in which I (a speaker whose Swahili is not perfectly fluent) participated, one participant addressed me predominantly in English. This indicates that they cannot or will not engage in translanguaging when they do not possess shared repertoires with their interlocutors. In addition, it is evident that a social norm exists to utilize a single named language exclusively in contexts such as official government statements or in schools. Similar to other registers within a single named language, the practice of translanguaging is also influenced by social conditions, as well as by boundaries and hierarchies of languages that indeed exist in the society. We must recognize that their everyday life is inseparable from the prevailing reality or society.

Still, the mode of communication observed in chapter 3 constitutes a significant aspect of people's everyday lives in Nairobi, serving as the most effective means for individuals to articulate their thoughts without restrictions on their linguistic resources. Given that the expressions in section 3.2. cannot be generated from a completely divided idiolect, the speakers can make meanings more broadly and more diversely by integrating their entire repertoires rather than relying on a restricted subset. This kind of practice cannot be adequately captured through code-by-code analysis, which has been commonly adopted in studies of language in Nairobi/Kenya. Thus, translanguaging can serve as a framework for articulating essential practices that constitute the source of their vibrant meaning-making in everyday life.

5. Social contribution of translanguaging

I have demonstrated that translanguaging practices are observable in everyday situations. This chapter will address the social contribution to this endeavor.

As previously mentioned, translanguaging is a term originating from the study of bilingual education. Thus, numerous evaluations and implementations of translanguaging have been undertaken in this domain. This paper focuses on the educational practice of translanguaging in Kenya. Otundo (2023) conducted a questionnaire survey among teacher trainees at a Kenyan university regarding the perceptions of translanguaging during classroom communication. Translanguaging in school denotes the purposeful incorporation of all students' linguistic and cultural resources into instruction (Lubliner & Grisham, 2017). In Kenya, the language of instruction transitions to English after the fourth grade of elementary education (Sheikh et al.,

2023). Translanguaging in this context refers to an instructor employing a fluid and creative approach to explain the contents of a lecture.

The survey revealed that respondents who are both students and lecturers positively perceive the translanguaging approach to instruction in terms of aspects such as attention retention, closeness to instructor, and overall class engagement (Otundo, 2023). For example, 87.5% indicated their agreement (i.e., “agree” or “strongly agree”) with the statement “the instructor is trying to make me understand better when they translanguage.” In addition, the statement that respondents are “able to understand difficult idea/concept when the instructor translanguages” was agreed by over 70% of respondents (Otundo, 2023).

However, the respondents exhibited reluctance to employ translanguaging in written assignments and examinations (Otundo, 2023). This result indicates a gap between translanguaging way, or everyday language practices, and institutional contexts such as written assignments and examinations. Henceforth, we must contemplate methods to enhance the educational system to one that takes everyday language practices into account. This article aims to highlight the social significance of studies that elucidate the everyday language practices of multilingual individuals to further this social agenda.

6. Conclusion

First, this paper aims to articulate the translanguaging practice in everyday situations in Nairobi, supported by actual data collected in that region. Consequently, it is evident that the socially designated labels of languages lack substantial significance in communication, and that the speakers generate diverse and unique expressions by integrating their entire linguistic repertoires. This outcome may also enhance translanguaging theory, which often prioritizes conceptual and ideological discourse while offering fewer concrete examples.

Second, this paper aims to indicate the social significance of articulating such everyday translanguaging. As demonstrated in Chapter 5, translanguaging has already been acknowledged in the field of education. However, despite the positive perception of translanguaging approach in terms of attention-gaining, relationships with instructor, and comprehension of students, there is hesitation toward employing translanguaging in written tasks and examinations. This result indicates a disparity between everyday language practices and the institutional aspects of education. Understanding and articulating their mode of day-to-day speech from their perspective can help bridge this gap.

However, this article’s analysis did not encompass the aspect of multimodality, which incorporates semiotic signs beyond spoken language, as posited by Li Wei (2018). This constitutes an essential agenda for future research.

Abbreviations

SG	singular	PAST	past
PL	plural	INF	infinitive
PASS	passive	COP	copula
FV	final vowel	PRF	perfect
PRS	present	FOC	focus
SBJV	subjunctive		

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

ChatGPT was used for proofreading and checking for typographical and grammatical errors. The author takes full responsibility for the content.

Footnotes

¹ Hereafter, English words are italicized and written in English orthography for the readers who are not familiar with the way of speaking in Nairobi. However, the author does not consider there to be clear boundaries between languages when speakers are communicating.

² Sheng is a mode of speech occasionally known as “Urban Youth Language,” which is spoken in urban areas, such as Nairobi. The features of Sheng include a frequent coinage of new words and manipulation or alternation of word meanings. Although Sheng is not officially recognized as a language in Kenya, it is listed up because participants identified it alongside other languages.

³ “Others” refers to languages that was listed twice or fewer times.

⁴ In Bantu languages, which include Swahili, have a classification system called “Noun class”. All nouns belongs to somewhere in this system according to its prefix. As explained in page 6, *m-* is a prefix of class 1, and *ka-* is of class 12.

References

- Ashton, E. O. (1947). *Swahili grammar: Including intonation* (Repr). Longman.
- Canagarajah, S. (2011). Translanguaging in the Classroom: Emerging Issues for Research and Pedagogy. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 2, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110239331.1>
- Dwivedi, A. V. (2014). Linguistic realities in Kenya: A preliminary survey. *Ghana Journal of Linguistics*, 3(2), 27–34. <https://doi.org/10.4314/gjl.v3i2.2>
- García, O., & Li, W. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gibson, H., Githiora, C., Kanana Erastus, F., & Marten, L. (2024). Morphosyntactic retention and innovation in Sheng, a youth language or stylect of Kenya. *Studies in Language*, 48(4), 909–950. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sl.22017.gib>
- Githiora, C. (2018). *Sheng: Rise of a Kenyan Swahili vernacular*. James Currey.
- Li Wei. (2011). Moment Analysis and translanguaging space: Discursive construction of identities by multilingual Chinese youth in Britain. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(5), 1222–1235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2010.07.035>
- Li Wei. (2018). Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx039>
- Lubliner, S., & Grisham, D. L. (2017). *Translanguaging: The Key to Comprehension for Spanish-Speaking Students and Their Peers*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6(3), 281–307. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2015-0014>
- Otundo, B. K. (2023). Communicating in multilingual learning ecologies: Students' perceptions of translanguaging in lecture rooms in Kenya. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Communication Studies*, 2(2), 24–34. <https://doi.org/10.58721/jllcs.v2i2.378>

- Räsänen, T. (2018). Translingual Practices in Global Business. A Longitudinal Study of a Professional Communicative Repertoire. In G. Mazzaferro (Ed.), *Translanguaging as everyday practice* (pp. 149–174). Springer.
- Sheikh, F., Rich, M., & Galvão, W. (2023). Language of Instruction and Education Policies in Kenya. *Reconsidering Development*, 7(1).
<https://pubs.lib.umn.edu/index.php/reconsidering/article/view/4569>
- Vaughan, J. (2018). Translanguaging and Hybrid Spaces: Boundaries and beyond in North Central Arnhem Land. In G. Mazzaferro (Ed.), *Translanguaging as everyday practice* (pp. 125–148). Springer.
- Williams, C. (1994). *Arfarniad o ddulliau dysgu ac addysgu yng nghyd-destun addysg uwchradd ddwyieithog* [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wales].
<https://research.bangor.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/arfarniad-o-ddulliau-dysgu-ac-addysgu-yng-nghyd-destun-addysg-uwcr/>

Contact email: u230803d@ecs.osaka-u.ac.jp