

The Transcending Mechanisms of Translanguaging in Sound-Meaning Mappings in the Linguistic Repertoire of L2 Recipients

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Abstract

This paper explores translanguaging practices among bilinguals, focusing on Chinese native speakers using English as a second language. Four main mechanisms emerge: a) L2 speakers map English sounds to similar ones in their native language (L1) for meaning comprehension. b) L2 learners rely on L1 pronunciation while memorizing L1 translations. c) Bilinguals attempt to incorporate new sounds into their linguistic repertoire for matching L2 sounds, sometimes leading to partial or incorrect understanding in an L1-dominant context. d) L2 learners add new sounds and meaning from English to their repertoire. Understanding these mechanisms has significance in social linguistics by shedding light on complex language phenomena and their underlying reasons. In pedagogy, it supports acceptance of language variations and aids L2 teachers in predicting learners' challenges and finding effective solutions.

[Key words: translanguaging / transcending mechanisms / sound-meaning mappings]

1 Introduction

With the closer bonding and interactions of countries in the world, linguistic phenomena have been increasing and becoming manifold, and as conventions in linguistic research, or in scientific research, researchers are describing these phenomena with distinct terms, among which translanguaging has gradually come into the spotlight. Starting as a descriptive label for a certain language occurrence (Li, 2018), translanguaging originally is often attributed to Cen Williams (1994; 1996), who first used it to describe a pedagogical practice in bilingual classrooms of Welsh revitalization programs where the input from teachers is Welsh and the output responded by students is English. With its development, translanguaging has become a word with a tremendous explanatory capacity to the complexity and variety of linguistic phenomena and practices both from social linguistics and pedagogical perspectives.

The reason why I intend to focus on the transcending mechanisms of translanguaging derives from the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign introduced by Saussure (1916), although he did not deny the fact that some words are onomatopoeic, or claim that hieroglyphics are fully arbitrary, and there are works to show the non-arbitrariness of language (Gasser et al., 2005; Monaghan et al., 2014). However, this paper does not intend to discuss the arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness of language but underlines bilinguals' internal processing of mapping sound and meaning, which turns out to be a complex interaction among many elements and composes a major part of language acquisition no matter the relationship between form and meaning is arbitrary or non-arbitrary, since to be skeptical about dichotomies is not, of course, to deny the importance of multiple processes or mechanisms (Cowley, 2014). When L2 learners start to learn the vocabulary of a new language, they have to expose and adapt themselves to the arbitrariness of languages, spending time and effort to tackle at least two fundamental systems of language: phonetic system and meaning system. During this process, the transcending interaction between or among different languages, or the creation of one's unique linguistic repertoire, is one of the most fascinating components of translanguaging, and the outcomes can often be unpredictable, as the *trans-* in translanguaging connotes the transcendence of named languages, the going beyond named languages as has been socially constructed (Li, 2018; Otheguy et al., 2015). This paper will take some common linguistic phenomena, mainly the transcending interaction between Chinese, as L1 or dominant language, and English as L2, as examples to illustrate and analyze the main operational mechanism of translanguaging from the aspects of sound-meaning mappings. It is worth noting that the so-called L1 and L2 in this paper are from the perspective of social convention. L1 refers to the speakers' mother tongue or dominant language. L2 here means any languages that come after L1 into the linguistic repertoire of its recipients, including dialects. Also, I use the word recipients instead of learners because recipients will cover a larger number of people who come into contact with L2, and oftentimes these people do not tend to learn socially named languages or dialects, but they are exposed to a different phonetic and meaning systems that are different from their L1. Thus, I believe the word, recipients, may better connote and describe the situation.

The paper begins by noting that human communication is inherently hybrid, then discusses the idea of transfer in language learning, which involves incorporating aspects of one's L1 when learning a second language, and goes on to describe four forms of sound-meaning mappings that can arise in the process of translanguaging, providing examples of each.

There might be some research significance of this transcending mechanism. First, since translanguaging is one of the important ways of language creation, word and meaning reconstruction, and occurrence of language varieties, understanding the phonetic-semantic

transcending mechanism of translanguaging can give us a glimpse of the internal mind flow in translanguaging. Second, the influence of translanguaging on language pedagogy is worth exploring. Having a relatively clear picture of the transcending mechanism of translanguaging can better help L2 teachers predict the problems that second language learners will meet, accept these phenomena with objectivity, and seek out ways to scaffold these problems actively as well.

2 Literature review

2.1 Language and translanguaging

Language, conventionally speaking, is a communicative tool invented by human beings to express ideas and thoughts. It is an entity that can be studied socially, culturally, metaphorically, cognitively, etc., oftentimes rendering it to be static in nature. On the contrary, Ortegay Gasset (1957) asserts that language is not a static construct that is already complete, but rather a constantly evolving process that is continuously being constructed. Becker (1991) introduced the term *linguaging* to convey that language is not a fixed entity, but rather an ongoing activity that humans engage in as they navigate the world around them. As a developing idea, the initial characterization is that “translanguaging is the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages” (Baker, 2011). The core of translanguaging is that the language systems in the minds of bilinguals or multilinguals are not separated explicitly, as suggested by socially named languages, but coexist in a unitary linguistic repertoire from which bilinguals or multilinguals select and deploy to make meaning and communicate with others. Also, the process of making use of one’s linguistic repertoire is characterized by Otheguy et al. (2015) as being free from strict adherence to socially and politically defined boundaries of named languages, which are typically tied to national and state identities. Translanguaging provides learners with an opportunity to draw on their prior knowledge from their first language to enhance their understanding of concepts and ideas in the second language, and by leveraging their existing linguistic resources, learners can clarify and expand their comprehension of the new language, ultimately improving their overall language proficiency (Qureshi & Aljanab, 2021).

2.2 Linguistic repertoire

The concept of a *linguistic repertoire* is first proposed as *verbal repertoire* by John Gumperz (1960), after drawing on empirical research conducted in two agricultural villages (Gumperz, 1964). Originally coined by Gumperz as a way to describe the diverse linguistic resources available to multilingual individuals, including registers and dialects “exhibited in the speaking

and writing patterns of a speech community” (Fishman, 1972), the concept has since been refined to encompass a broader range of communicative practices. Gumperz’s pioneering research laid the foundation for the study of the complex interplay between language, culture, and social interaction, and his work continues to inspire scholars in the field of sociolinguistics today. Finegan (2004) asserts that linguistic or verbal repertoire is “the set of language varieties used in the speaking and writing practices of a speech community”. In other words, the linguistic repertoire of a speech community includes all the linguistic varieties, such as registers, dialects, styles, accents, etc., which exist in this community.

Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes a space where different identities, values, and practices interact and transform into new ones, rather than simply co-existing, and this space is much like the linguistic repertoire mentioned above. This perspective aligns with Blommaert’s (2010) argument that the focus should shift from immobile languages to mobile language resources and repertoires. He describes the “polyglot repertoire” as not being tied to any specific national or stable language system, but rather linked to an individual’s unique life trajectory and experiences (Blommaert, 2008). This approach emphasizes the dynamic and fluid nature of language practices and the importance of considering how individuals draw from multiple linguistic resources to navigate and construct their identities in different contexts.

There is consent among the scholars who deal with translanguaging that the focus of interest is shifting from languages to speech and repertoire and that individual languages should not be seen unquestioningly as set categories (Busch, 2012). Therefore, this paper also focuses on the sound-meaning mappings in oral language, since written language can be regarded as secondary or auxiliary.

There exists a research gap between the concepts of translanguaging and linguistic repertoire. As mentioned in the literature, translanguaging is heavily influenced by an individual’s unique linguistic repertoire, which is shaped by their social context, subjectivity, cultural background, life experience, linguistic ability, and other related factors. However, there is a lack of understanding regarding how bilingual individuals use their linguistic repertoire to interact with the world and make meaning. Due to its complexity, it may be impossible to create a universal mechanism that explains all translanguaging phenomena. Nonetheless, there are notable mechanisms that can be derived from many translanguaging phenomena, especially when bilingual individuals encounter a language that is substantially different from their first language, and that mechanism can be elaborated as follows.

3 The transcending mechanisms of translanguaging in sound-meaning mappings

Human communication is hybrid in nature as it combines both digital and analog elements (Love, 2007). Individuals do not simply “use” pre-existing language forms; instead, they modify and mold their physical behavior, including their speech, to align with communal norms and practices that have historical continuity and shape the cultural and historical traditions of the community (Thibault, 2017). During the whole learning process, the transfer of previous knowledge permeated (Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, 2000). Butzkamm (1993) argues that native language is not a coat that learners could take off before they stepped into the classroom. When learning a second language, individuals often unintentionally incorporate aspects of their native language, such as phonology, semantics, socio-cultural background, and other related factors. So, it is reasonable for us to assume when L2 learners encounter unfamiliar language elements, they will search their whole linguistic repertoire to match linguistic signs with meaning.

As L2 phonetic sounds are introduced, bilingual individuals utilize their existing linguistic repertoire to process them. This process has two extremes. One is the new sounds are absorbed by the L1 linguistic repertoire, leading to a fusion of “corresponding” L1 sounds of the L2 sounds. The other extreme is that the learners cannot find counterparts of new sounds in their L1 linguistic repertoire, so they add a new element to their linguistic repertoire. The final output form of L2 can be any form within the two extremes. The phonetic transcending mechanisms can be seen in Figure 1.

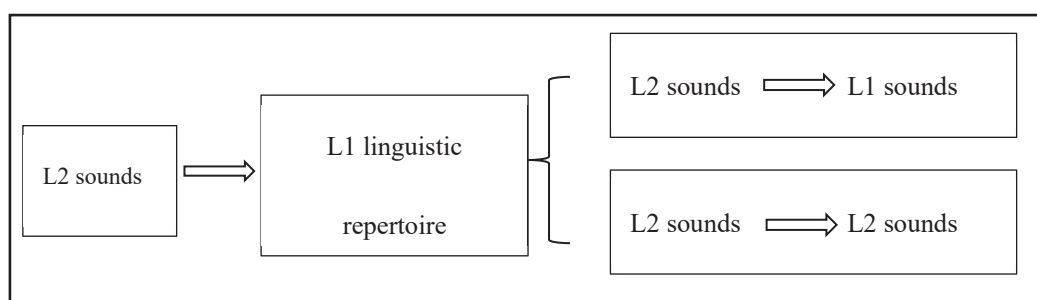


Figure1 The Transcending Mechanisms of Translanguaging in L2 Sounds

Next, learners will match sounds with meanings. Since they have two extremes of sounds, there are four forms of the mapping mechanism. On the one hand, they can match the L1 sounds they transformed from the L2 sounds with the corresponding meaning in L1 or take the original meaning in L2. On the other hand, when they build new L2 sounds in their linguistic

repertoire, they may return to their L1 context or construct its original meaning of L2 with the L2 sounds they obtained before, which can be seen in Figure 2. And the four forms of the transcending mechanisms can be elaborated with examples in the following contents.

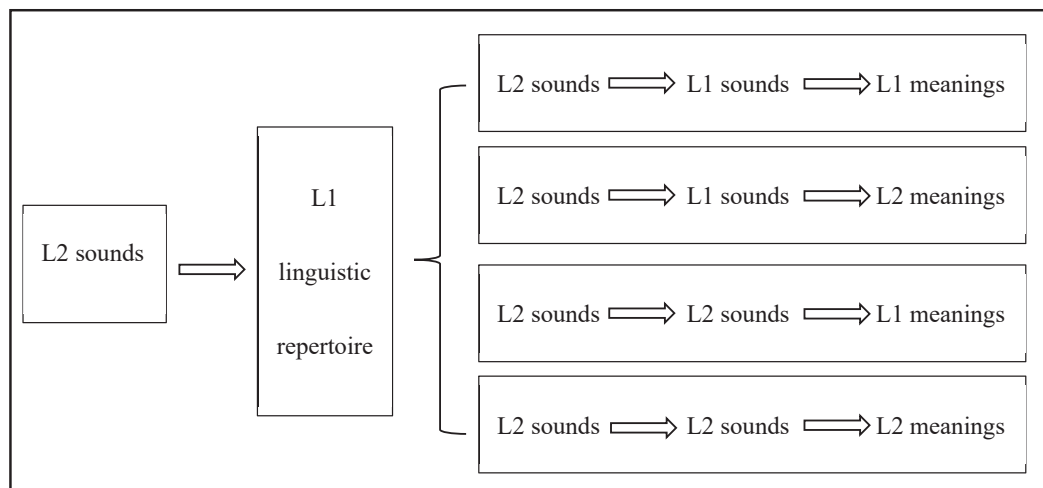


Figure2 The Transcending Mechanisms of Translanguaging in Sound-Meaning Mappings

3.1 L2 sounds - L1 sounds - L1 meanings

The first typical form of the transcending mechanism of translanguaging is using L1 phonetic inventory to find corresponding sounds and match them with meaning in L1. The misheard lyrics in English, or the “Kong Er (空耳) Translation” in Chinese, can be an appropriate example of this transcending mechanism. Misheard lyrics originated from the word “そらみみ” (so ra mi mi) in Japanese, which originally meant “auditory hallucinations”. Now “Kong Er” in Chinese was used to refer to deliberately rewriting the pronunciation of a word or sentence heard with another word with similar pronunciation mainly in Chinese in order to achieve the entertainment purpose of spoof or pun, and most of them can be seen in lyrics rewriting.

One of the most famous works of Kong Er includes “I Play Mud in the Northeast”. The original song is a love song, “Tunak Tunak Tun”, from India. After the spoofing by netizens, there are a few very representative lyrics:

“Dholna Vajje Tumble Vaali Taar Sun Dil Di Pukaar AajaKar
Layieh Pyaar”
/ dɔlnə vadjɛ tɔmbe va:li ta:r sʌn dil di pu:kɑ:r ɑ:dʒə,kər
lejɪə pjɑ:r /
beloved play drum of you wire hear heart of call come
bring love

“Beloved, play the drum of your heart's wire, listen to the call, come and bring love.”

However, the lyrics carry some phonetic similarity in Chinese, represented by the Chinese “pinyin” and Chinese characters as follows.

duō lěng a, wǒ zài dōngběi wán níbā, suī rán dōngběi bú dà, wǒ zài dàlián méiyǒu jiā.

多 冷 啊，我 在 东 北 玩 泥 巴，虽 然 东 北 不 大，我 在
大 连 没 有 家。

very cold ah I at northeast play mud although north not big I at
Dalian no home

“It’s so cold, I play in the Northeast Mud, although the Northeast is not big, I don’t have a home in Dalian.”

Although these four lines have certain phonetic similarities with the original song, the reason for its widespread dissemination is that its text has found resonance in the real domestic environment, especially the second half of the sentence “Although the Northeast is not big, I don’t have a home in Dalian.” The widespread dissemination of this text can be attributed to its relevance to contemporary society. Firstly, the mention of Dalian, a city in the Northeast of China, adds context to the discussion. Secondly, the use of the word “although” introduces a transitional element to the sentence, making it flow more smoothly. Lastly, the issue of unaffordable housing and inadequate living conditions is a pressing topic in today’s society. In fact, many viewers have even commented in interactive messages that Indian people have noticed the high housing prices in Dalian. As a result, works like this are no longer confined to small audiences and are gradually gaining public attention. This is also because translanguaging is not simply the mixing of linguistic forms from diverse language sources, but also involves a variety of identity articulations and negotiations within newly created social spaces (Li & Zhu, 2013).

For another example, the Russian folk song “Katyusha” was sung with Kong Er such as “Qie Luo Bo” (cutting radishes), and it was also because the singer’s Russian pronunciation was too blunt, which sounded like Chinese. There are also TV programs in Japan that feature hallucinatory lyrics. Asahi TV’s late-night variety show “Tamori Club” hosted by Tamori has a segment called “awaa” (アワー), which collects the hallucination lyrics provided by the audience (usually songs from outside Japan), and then puts the hallucination into a video.

To sum up, when learners use the sound and meaning system of their linguistic repertoire in their L1 to match the sound they obtained in L2, they are aware of its incompatibility and aim at spoofs or puns. This translanguaging process is filled with creativity and imagination, people’s subjectivity, and social context to expand the phonetic and semantic repertoire.

3.2 L2 sounds - L1 sounds - L2 meanings

This is a common phenomenon when L2 learners are first exposed to the phonetic and semantic systems of L2, especially when the two language systems are typologically different, such as English and Chinese. Their learning strategy is usually to use their phonetic inventory in L1 to indicate the pronunciation of new words they met and memorize the translated meaning in L1 in their textbooks. For example, when Chinese learners of EFL first come into contact with English, it is common for them to feel anxious about inputting a large number of vocabularies within several months, and they don't know how to digest and absorb it. Therefore, many students, aged between 6 and 12, will use Chinese characters to help them to pronounce English words and they even write Chinese characters next to each English word in order to quickly master the pronunciation of the word. Here are the examples I collected from an English complementary school in a northwest city of China:

book “布克” (bù kè); morning “猫宁” (māo níng); glass “哥拉斯” (gē lā sī);
bottle “包头” (bāo tóu); dinner “低呢” (dī ne)

The Chinese characters they use may be different, but they all carry similar pronunciations to indicate the sounds of L2 words. Actually, this transcending of two or more sound systems, like using L1 phonetic sounds to indicate L2 words' pronunciations, is more common than we can think. It evolved many language varieties. For example, following the exchange of Chinese and English languages after the Opium War, a special language, Pidgin English, appeared in the coastal ports. This language simplifies the grammar of Chinese and mixes the pronunciation of English. Like other pidgin languages, Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) is not the intentional invention of any individual. Its vocabulary is based mainly on English, with a few words of Portuguese, Cantonese, and even Hindi origin, but it is not a dialect of English, nor is it a version of Chinese (Shi, 1991). For those non-native English speakers, who were largely Cantonese speakers, some sounds are not present in their language system, such as /v/, /θ/, /ð/, /r/, or /z/, and these sounds are replaced by similar sounds in L1 by its speakers. Hall (1944) also describes a few morphophonemic alterations. For example, native Chinese speakers tend to add a vowel in the ending of consonants, as in take (/tek(i)/) and sleep (/slip(a)/). Some may optionally omit the final consonant of words ending in /r/ and /l/, and sometimes /d/, as in little (/litə(l)/) and more (/mo(r)/). Although CPE began to decline in the late 19th century as standard English began to be taught in the country's education system (McArthur, 2002), it can still be a good example of translanguaging.

As I said before, there is hardly any transcending forms or mechanism that could render accurate understanding and equivalence of the meaning of L2 words, and they usually lead to varieties of languages, which will be further discussed in the next part. However, if words

that belong to the basic level in cognitive linguistics (Brown, 1958; Rosch et al., 1976; Lakoff, 1987) happen to be the learning target of L2 learners, chances are that they can match the meaning in L2 to a larger extent since there are relatively explicit counterparts in their L1 and designated and concrete references. Compared to words that belong to basic-level categories, words included in superordinate and subordinate categories are more likely to cause misunderstanding and cognitive obstacles because of the lack of counterparts and encyclopedic knowledge in L1. This is also where second language educators can explore to design textbooks for beginners.

3.3 L2 sounds - L2 sounds - L1 meanings

After L2 learners learned some basic words and have some awareness of the phonological, morphological, and grammatical awareness of L2, many of them will try to modify their pronunciation and accent to make them more like those of native speakers. As mentioned in 3.2, however, this mimic of accent can be a target of L2 learners but there is no need to regard learners' accents as inferior to the so-called standard one.

As for the L2 sounds matching the L1 meaning, I would like to clarify the concepts here. While with the deepening of studying, they inevitably meet words that cause confusion or do not have explicit implications, forcing them to understand these words by referring to the so-called counterparts in L1 consciously or unconsciously. This can lead to “false friends”, which are words that appear to have the same meaning in both languages, but actually have different meanings or connotations. For example, in English, the word “actually” means “in fact” or “really”. In Spanish, the word “actualmente” looks similar, but it actually means “currently” or “at present”. So, a Spanish speaker learning English might think that “actually” and “actualmente” are equivalent, but they are not. Similarly, the Chinese word “实际” (shíjì) is sometimes translated as “actual” or “real” in English, but it can also mean “practical” or “feasible”. In contrast, the English word “actual” typically means “existing in fact”. “领导” (lǐngdǎo) is a Chinese word that is often translated as “leader” in English, but it has a broader meaning in Chinese and can refer to anyone in a position of authority, including bosses, supervisors, or government officials. The English word “privacy” means the state of being alone and not watched or disturbed by other people or the state of being free from the attention of the public. However, the Chinese translation “隐私 (yǐn sī)” actually refers to the moral and legitimate things that have already happened but cannot or will not be shown to others. The two are actually not equivalent. With the increasing exposure to L2 vocabulary, the mapping of sounds and meanings will also be overlapped. For instance, when Chinese learners of EFL learned “speak”, “say”, “talk”, and “tell”, they may have difficulties telling the nuances among

those words due to a lack of context, leading to mistakes when outputting English. So, although Chinese EFL learners learn the meanings of L2 words, sometimes they actually are using the false counterparts of the words in their L1 repertoire to make sense of them, leaving a false matching with sound and meaning.

3.4 L2 sounds - L2 sounds - L2 meanings

When L2 recipients are exposed to L2, it is also possible for bilinguals to add new elements to or rebuild their linguistic repertoire, i.e., the new L2 sounds are taken as the whole exotic phonetic forms as well as the corresponding semantics in the source language. This is a time-consuming and laborious process, requiring huge efforts in rote memorizing and shifting cognitive patterns. Therefore, it is opposed to the principle of cognitive economy and people with less exposure to L2 do not tend to perform this process often. But when it appears, it usually presents itself in the following cases.

First, L2 recipients may add new elements to their linguistic repertoire in a passive way. Because of the differences in geographic location, climate variation, lifestyles, cultural influences, and social context, the socially named languages usually bear the cognitive imprint of the factors mentioned above, leading to differences in the extent of easiness of describing the world around them. The meaning of the word does not exist in the L1 semantic repertoire, rendering learners to refer to external information to understand it or the words of L2 are in contextualized situations when recipients meet it, such as the words presented in a form like it is in a dictionary with the explanation in L2. For example, Boas (1911) mentioned for the first time that the Eskimos had several words to describe snow: “aput” (snow on the ground), “qana” (snow falling), “piqsirpoq” (piled snow), and “qimuqsuq” (pile of snow), whereas in English there is only one (snow). Imagine the transcending mechanism of translanguaging, when L2 recipients come into contact with “qana” (snow falling), they have to refer to the meaning in the source language to understand it. This is one of the situations where new elements can be added to the linguistic repertoire of L2 recipients. For another example, some words are born in a specific social-political context, such as filibuster, cloture, Gerrymander, etc. Due to the different political systems now between many English-speaking countries and China, Chinese learners of EFL or L2 recipients have to refer to dictionaries to understand these words and vice versa. When English speakers become recipients of an L2, like Chinese, they have to refer to the Chinese political context when they meet “纸老虎 (zhǐ lǎo hǔ)” – paper tiger, “四个现代化 (sì gè xiàn dài huà)” – four modernizations, and “一带一路 (yí dài yí lù)” – the Belt and Road Initiatives.

Second, in an active way. L2 recipients with metalinguistic awareness or knowledge or interest

to compare and contrast between the socially named L1 and L2 may actively seek the words' meanings where they are used, such as looking them up in dictionaries written in L2 or talking to native speakers. It's important for learners to be aware of these gaps in their semantic repertoire and to be open to learning new words and concepts in the L2. This requires a willingness to engage with the language and to seek out new information and experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom. With time and practice, learners can expand their L2 semantic repertoire and become more proficient in understanding and using the language.

4 Conclusion

Although I agree with Cowley's (2017) view that how people speak cannot explain language and, conversely, that linguistic analysis cannot explain how people speak, especially in cases of translanguaging practices because of their complexity, variety, and unpredictability, we can still probe into the general or prominent mechanisms of certain language phenomena concerning translanguaging. When there is a sound stimulation of L2, including dialects, enters into the linguistic repertoire of its recipients, the mechanism of sound-meaning mapping can be unpredictable due to the influence of recipients' L1 (dominant) language, understanding of its sound and meaning, social context, personal subjectivity, and creativity and criticality of both languages. However, there are still many language phenomena that can be observed, classified, and summarized to reveal some clues about the transcending mechanisms of translanguaging.

There might be four main forms to typify this mechanism or process. First, with creativity and criticality, L2 sound recipients may convert L2's sound to similar L1's sound and match the corresponding meaning in L1. Second, beginners of L2 learning may often use their pronunciation in L1 to pronounce the words in L2 while memorizing the translated meaning in L1. Third, with the proceeding of learning or exposure, recipients may find the differences in pronunciation and try to establish new phonetic sounds to their linguistic repertoire to match L2 sounds, and still memorize or learn the translated meaning in L1, like in a bilingual dictionary. It should be pointed out that both in the second and third cases, chances are that the meaning they get access to or process is in an L1-dominant context, leading to the meaning of some words that belong to the basic level defined by cognitive linguistics may find their counterparts or equivalences in L1 while others that possess abstract images, were born in a specific social context, or with relevance to the physical or cognitive perspective may be partially or wrongly understood. Last, L2 recipients or learners may try their best to establish both new phonetic sounds and source meaning from L2 and add them to their linguistic repertoire, cases can be seen in dealing with some words with unique social-economic, -political, and -cultural imprints. Again, the linguistic repertoire is heteroglossic and unpredictable, its

forms and expressions can hardly be illustrated in detail.

Busch (2012) initiated a debate on the directions in which the concept of linguistic repertoire might be further developed to also include language practices, which are characteristic of the conditions of super-diversity. Revealing and summarizing the reasons and forms of translanguaging practices can be of great importance. From the perspective of social linguistics, they can provide a glimpse of the extensive and complicated linguistic phenomena. From the point of view of second language teaching and acquisition, they can be persuasive evidence to ask both learners and instructors to accept language varieties and facilitate L2 teachers to better predict the difficulties and obstacles learners might meet and to seek out effective solutions. Also, all these mechanisms tell a truth to teachers that they cannot simply teach language knowledge as if it is a one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, they must be attentive to the individual characteristics of each student, including their affective engagement and sociocultural context when it comes to learning and language (Yeakey, 2001). For example, teachers should enable learners to utilize their extensive knowledge of the L1 to complement their TL knowledge in the classroom (Cook, 2005). Strategies that deliberately and systematically incorporate the use of the students' L1 include promoting effective L1 use to establish interconnected L1 and TL knowledge in students' minds (Cook, 2001). Edstrom (2006) explains how her students' L1 assisted them in recognizing the difficulties of language learning, understanding the relationship between language and cultural norms, and avoiding stereotypical ideas associated with the TL's culture. MacSwan (2017) argues that both codeswitching and translanguaging depict bilingual individuals as possessing a single linguistic system that shares grammatical resources while also maintaining internal language-specific differences.

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