Transpositioning: Translanguaging and the Liquidity of Identity

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This article seeks to address the ever-expanding and shifting communicative demands of 'liquid modernity' by focussing on two key issues: the need to reconceptualize language and communication as a consequence of the diversification of media and resources people draw upon to meet these demands; and the need for a new analytical framework to capture how people perform multiplex roles simultaneously and spontaneously through dynamic and adaptive communicative practices. We do the former through further elaboration of the scholarship on translanguaging and the latter with a new concept of transpositioning. We argue that the latter is enabled by translanguaging practices and is a necessary capacity participants in the social life of liquid modernity need to develop in order to deal with everyday communicative demands. We develop the concept with analysis of two examples of lived experiences of multilinguals and explore the theoretical and methodological implications for applied linguistics.

1. The liquid modern and the posthuman

Upon the advent of the third millennium, Zygmunt Bauman reminded us that change is no longer a variable, but a constant, indeed the ultimate constant. And it is this paradoxical constancy of change which lends the diverse manifestations of what Bauman characterized as 'liquid modernity', including all its languages, modes, and media of communication, a 'fragility, temporariness, vulnerability' and, above all, liquidity:

> Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects—but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To 'be modern' means to modernize—compulsively, obsessively; not so much just 'to be', let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever 'becoming', avoiding completion, staying underdefined... Being always, at any stage and at all times, 'post-something' is also an undetachable feature of modernity. (Bauman 2012[2000]: viii).

The term 'liquid modernity' captures a fundamental paradigm shift in modern cultures wherein 'the growing conviction that change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty' (ibid.). Liquid modernity puts a premium on the flow and flux rather than the organicity and

predictability of things. Liquidity is the new power. It is precisely 'the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of human bonds and networks' (Bauman 2012[2000]: 14) that facilitate mobility, slipperiness, shiftiness, randomness, evasiveness, and fugitiveness—all qualities that define the conditions of social and political life in contemporary times. Relatedly, progress and improvement are now measured in terms of smallness, lightness, portability, and malleability, instead of monumentality, heaviness, substantiality, and solidity (Bauman 2012[2000]: 13). We are compelled to spontaneously and simultaneously engage in multiplex virtual networks that support everyday communications, requiring continuous expansions of our repertoire. With Big Tech companies churning out novel media technologies at unstoppable rates and users perennially updating themselves with the latest gadgets with niche affordances, multimodal multitasking has become an essential condition of contemporary life.

Conceptually, liquid modernity dovetails more broadly into the philosophical paradigm of posthumanism. Unlike humanism, posthumanism takes us beyond the cognitive agency and intellectual superiority of humans to critically consider the ecological relations between humans and the material environment in which they operate, including nature, animals, technologies, spaces, and artefacts. One of the themes highlighted in this line of thinking is the fraught relation between humans and machines. As Pennycook (2018: 4) succinctly puts it, 'the major technological changes that both surround us and become part of us are challenging the very idea of what it means to be human. Instrumentation, the growth of data and new forms of monitoring and sensing around our bodies (e.g. the new health monitors on first-world wrists) are changing the way we understand and perceive humanity, with an ever increasing monitoring and surveillance of behaviour'. The anxiety caused by the rise of artificial intelligence systems is symptomatic of how humans are inextricably intertwined with digital platforms, such that it no longer makes sense to speak of humanity as if it were autonomous of the artefacts and technologies deeply embedded in the fabric of social and political life.

An important consequence of posthumanism is the distribution and provisionalization of the idea of personhood (Pennycook 2018: 12). No longer is one's identity a monovariant construct; it is rather in dynamic movement within a broader ecology and in constant interaction with other human and nonhuman actants. In other words, instead of organic entities, identities are *flows of sensibilities* that intersect other flows of sensibilities and transform themselves within the contingencies of such intersections. On this view, identity categories are shaken up, constituting no more than loose labels that define temporary conditions of existence. Identities, even those that appear fundamental and innate, are far from predetermined at birth or stable throughout one's life trajectory. The ethical implication is that posthumanism creates 'a more humble sense of humanity—a more inclusive one, a reconsideration of why all those others were always being left out along lines of class, race, gender, sexual orientation or disability' (Pennycook 2018: 5).

This essay seeks to address the seemingly random, ever-expanding, and shifting communicative demands of liquid modernity by focussing on two key issues: the need to reconceptualize language and communication as a consequence of the diversification of media and resources users draw upon to meet these demands; and the need for a new analytical framework to capture how people perform multiplex roles spontaneously and simultaneously through dynamic and adaptive communicative practices. We do the former with the concept of translanguaging and the latter with transpositioning. As translanguaging has been discussed quite extensively in the literature, our focus is on developing the idea of transpositioning, which we argue is enabled by translanguaging practices and a necessary capacity in dealing with the everyday communicative demands of liquid modernity.

2. Translanguaging: from linguistic codes to semiotic resources

Translanguaging reconceptualizes language and communication in response to broader epistemological shifts in the context of the liquid modern and the posthuman. As mentioned above, liquid modernity implies an immanent proclivity to change. This suggests the porosity of borders

that were previously perceived as impermeable, including those separating named languages as well as delineating linguistic and non-linguistic modalities. The liquid modernization of contemporary life means our approach to understanding communication, particularly in multilingual societies, needs to move away from the model of separate multilingualism pointing to the co-presence and juxtaposition of discrete languages (García and Li 2014: 14). Instead, multilingualism needs to be conceived as dynamic, where resources (phonic, graphical, lexicogrammatical, syntactical, and so on) from different languages and modes (verbal, visual, gestural, kinetic, tactile, and so on) are thrown together and integrated in a semiotic repertoire which individuals draw on to produce creative and/or critical interventions. This latter model underpins translanguaging, a practical theory of language (Li 2018. See also Lee and Li, 2020 and Li, 2011).

Two points are worth noting. First, translanguaging takes us beyond conventional linguistic imaginaries by including in its framework alternative modes of signification which are not adjunctive to but conjunctive with the verbal-linguistic. As Kress (2011: 242) maintains, language in the textual sense 'is just one among the resources for making meaning; and... all such resources available in one social group and its cultures at a particular moment ought to be considered as constituting one coherent domain... *all equal*, *potentially*, in their capacity to contribute meaning to a complex *semiotic identity*' (emphasis added). Here the notion of a semiotic identity constituted through the simultaneous orchestration of multiple modes—'all equal, potentially'—points to a breaking down of traditional hierarchies governing the conception of the verbal and the nonverbal. This conception is reinforced by the idea of transmodalities, which indexes 'the simultaneous co-presence and co-reliance of language and other semiotic resources in meaning-making, *affording each equal weight*' and conceptualizes these resources as 'embedded and given meaning *within the specific assemblage*, and within trajectories of time and space, *continuously shifting and re-shaping* in their contexts and mobility' (Hawkins 2018: 64; emphasis added).

Second, translanguaging is not limited to the intersection of signs. It is as much if not more about the transformation and invention of identities. This is where individuals' 'personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief, and ideology as well as their cognitive and physical capacity' (Li 2011: 1223) come into the picture as an assemblage to bear on their communication. The implication is that to make sense of multilingual practices, one needs to *ecologize* language; that is: to locate language—broadly defined to include transmodal resources—in its ecological context, which includes all the material and non-material circumstances of social interaction as well as their modulation within a time-space trajectory. Such an ecological perspective takes us beyond the cognition of the language user into a holistic time-space constituted by events, objects, physical environments, and people.

This ecological perspective also brings us back to posthumanism. Recall that one of the consequences of the posthuman condition is the distribution of personhood, which means what is often referred to as 'self' is contingent rather than permanent, always susceptible to shifts and transformations in interaction with other 'selves'. The invisible but palpable boundary defining one's identity becomes permeable and mobile, rendering it impossible to speak of a singular self in any time-space trajectory, even within the duration and space of a single episode of conversation. More than that, liquid modernity not only catalyzes the transcendence of boundaries between named languages and between modes of expression; it goes beyond the agentive mind to question the human-nonhuman divide. Arguing that applied linguists should view humanism as 'a broader philosophical background to the ways we think about language, people, and communication that focuses on humans as creative thinkers and independent actors', Pennycook (2018: 13) contends that we need to think beyond the anthropocentric assumptions of humanism.

The premise of posthumanist applied linguistics is that communication is not to be seen as a mind-to-mind activity; it is an integrated multimodal event jointly constructed by human as well as nonhuman participants involving diverse resources. This means all interactions take place within particular semiotic configurations that invariably change in different time-spaces, subjecting the identities of human participants to the ensuing contingencies. Language users thus

change their perception according to particular interactions with other people, artefacts, and spaces. This renders the idea of self as a stable, grounded ballast a myth. As Hawkins (2022: 3) has argued:

> who we are, how we make meaning in communications, and how we see the world and understand ourselves and others in it, are always-emergent processes co-constructed with others through social interactions that are situated-or positioned- in particular times and places, between particular people (and things), and located in (and shaped by) particular histories, trajectories and movements of ideas, ideologies, resources, information, goods and people. Everyone and everything are emplaced in particular ways- positioned- in any interaction, and meanings being made are contingent on that positioning.

Corollary to the transgression of institutionalized borders between named languages (translanguaging) and between semiotic modes (transmodalities) is a continual transitioning of one's positionality and, ultimately, the transcending of singular positionalities: transpositioning.

3. Transpositioning: beyond stances

The term 'transpositioning' may in the first instance evoke the word 'transposition', which as a noun refers to 'a condition of being transposed'; and to 'transpose' means to 'alter the order of (a set or series of things), or the position of (a thing) in a series; to put each of (two or more things) in the place of the other or others, to interchange; esp. to alter the order of letters in a word or of words in a sentence' (OED). In translation studies parlance, transposition denotes a procedure where a word or phrase in one language is translated into a word or phrase of a different word class (figure of speech) in another language, for instance, where a noun phrase in English is translated as a verb phrase in Japanese. However, transpositioning as we use it here is not a progressive verb form derived from 'transposition' in the above senses. Rather, our usage of the term comes from the notion of 'positioning' in social psychology.

Positioning is the process in which individuals articulate their personhood by taking up changeable identities in interaction (Davies and Harré 1990; Harré 2012). It is the 'assignment of fluid "parts" or "roles" to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts' (van Langenhove and Harré 1999: 17). Such discursive constructions are mediated through the labels we use to make sense of people, events, and circumstances. Labels are not universals; they are drawn from culture- and locale-specific repertoires. In communication, we claim certain identities and produce selfhoods based on the labels we draw from our repertoire, at the same time as we continually interpret and reinterpret the identities and personhoods claimed by other participants and filtered through labels arising from their repertoires. As a result, positionings which are not necessarily congruent develop and intersect each other, in the course of which participants adjust their identity locations in response to the evolving development of the jointly constructed storyline.

The language connection in positioning theory lies in its interest in how people 'use words (and discourses of all types) to locate themselves and others', where discursive location can take on the form of affectual polarities with respect to persons or groups, such as 'trusted' versus 'distrusted', 'with us' versus 'against us', 'to be saved' versus 'to be wiped out' (Moghaddam and Harré 2010: 2). Claims to rights and imposition of duties are illocutionary functions that come from speech acts (Moghaddam and Harré 2010: 3). This recalls the sociolinguistic notion of stance, which describes ways that people 'position themselves in conversation, often in terms of politeness, certainty, or affect/emotion' (Kiesling 2022: 410), such as the use of *dude* in American English to express 'cool solidarity' (ibid.: 411). Strongly affiliated with positioning, it describes the ways in which language users position themselves with respect to 'their words and texts... their interlocutors and audiences... and with respect to a context that they simultaneously respond to and construct linguistically' (Jaffe 2009: 4).

Applied reflexively, positioning creates a form of self-identity, which, like stance, is metamorphous. One of the best, and relatively recent, exemplifications of this is the personal pronoun movement, a practice whereby media users indicate their preferred gender identity alongside their names, for instance, when signing off emails. Sequences such as he/him/his and she/her/hers are emblematic of an openness to dealignment between sexual and gender identity and of an inclusiveness with respect to nonbinary identification. If national identity, as Michael Billig posits, is more than 'an inner psychological state' relating to the formation of a self (Billig 1995: 69), might the same not be said of gender identity in particular or identity in general? If identity is an *effect* of positionings subject to discursive articulation (for instance, through calculated pronominal choices), then we must come to terms with its inherent qualities—disembedding, unencumbered, under-determined, and free-floating (Bauman 1996: 18–19).

Attaching the trans-prefix to positioning turns the spotlight on all of these attributes of the notion of identity. Specifically, transpositioning foregrounds a susceptibility to constant change, with a view to transcending any given position. Transpositioning thus refers to a *processual and iterative shifting* of the identity position of an actor-in-communication; that is, the process in which individuals allow their stance with regard to any given proposition to be in flow-and-flux as they interact with others. To be in flow-and-flux means to release oneself (one's self) from given frameworks and habitual patterns of thought, generating possibility spaces in which one develops new routes (compare: roots) of thinking in conjunction with other participants and cultivates an affect of empathy for others. If one's positioning is conventionally determined in relation to geopolitical location as well as such commonplace categories as race, gender, and social class, transpositioning cuts across these parameters, unravelling the tensions and malleability of different individuals' stances in relation to each other.

In transgressing traditional classifications based on artificial and politically motivated lines of demarcation, transpositioning foregrounds the *relational* quality of one's positioning. This means in attempting to position oneself within a network of participants, one continually (re)evaluates, (dis)confirms, and (trans)forms one's relations with others. Thus, interpersonal relations constructed through communication are never pre-established but eminently changeable. The upshot of this is that traditional hierarchies can be subverted, rhizomatic and dialogic engagement with others becomes possible, and multi-directional intercultural exchanges based around equitability and reciprocity can be shaped.

It is important to stress that transpositioning does not denote a simple change from one stance to another. Rather than denote an alteration or alternation in position (transposition in the OED sense), transpositioning underscores the inherent fluidity of one's self manifesting as continual transformations of perspectives between and beyond fixated identity options. These identity options emerge transiently in interactions and hence are not binding on individuals. In other words, transpositioning references a process of *unlocating* oneself—not *dislocating,* which presumes the existence of a point of origin from which one is removed—as well as a *suspension* of all points of origin. In this process, individuals release themselves from default roles in social interaction and continually navigate their standpoints in the course of engaging other participants. Such navigations may be catalyzed by semiotic practices that themselves breach established boundaries, such as translanguaging and transmodalities.

Transpositioning is an ineluctable condition given the multi-directional and voluminous flows of people, capital, technologies, ideas, and materials on a transnational basis. No longer is it viable to assume one, and only one, position: if change is the only constant, as Bauman reminds us, might it not be possible to posit that the only viable position is, in fact, not *one* position at all, but a *trans*position that transcends any single position? The implication is ethical, for the liquidation of boundaries, real or imagined, weakens vertical hierarchical structures based on singular ideological locations. This opens up rhizomatic spaces of potentialities for us to reflect, critique, and transform regimes of knowledge and power, as we transposition dialogically through flows of resources, communications, and activities across the borders of languages, economies, and nation-states.

4. Methodological perspective

Methodologically, this article aims to make an intervention by establishing personal stories as a legitimate ground for research in applied linguistics. As a source of data, anecdotes are usually treated as suspect at best and unempirical at worst. Recently, however, scholars have called into question conventional research methodologies and epistemologies as far as translanguaging is concerned. In a forum piece, Jerry Won Lee questions the value of indices like sample size for the purposes of research in translanguaging, calling for a translanguaging of research methodology itself:

> [A]n overreliance on established epistemologies and methodologies can serve as an impediment to the pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of translanguaging... the urgency lies not only in drawing on appropriate research methodologies to make sense of translanguaging but also how to translanguage research methodologies themselves in our pursuit of understanding language practices that have historically been marginalized in various realms of society and education and overlooked or dismissed by researchers in applied linguistics (J. W. Lee 2022).

In other words, it is something of a paradox to be attempting to understand peripherized language practices using mainstream research methodologies premised on conventional language practices. This is where the idea of Moment Analysis enters the picture, where the 'moment' is 'a point in or a period of time which has outstanding significance... characterized by its distinctiveness and impact on subsequent events or developments', and where participants witnessing these moments 'would recognize their importance and may adjust their behaviour according to their interpretation of them' (Li 2011: 1224). To focus on *moments* is to steer away from *patterns*—the central preoccupation of applied linguistics with its premium on systematic data collection and analysis. The justification for Moment Analysis is that it allows researchers to focus on spontaneity, specifically 'what prompted a specific action ... at a specific moment in time and the consequences of the action including the re-actions by other people', and this can only materialize if one sets aside patterns, which are 'long-term outcomes of original, momentary actions, which become recognized, adopted, and repeated by the same and/or other individuals' (Li 2022).

As moments are by definition unpatterned, their exposition requires a different kind of data than those recognized by social scientific methods of inquiry, be they quantitative or qualitative. In this regard, the present article exemplifies the use of personal stories, or anecdotal episodes, in eliciting moments of relevance to the theoretical concern at hand. Personal stories represent a self-reflexive form of data that provide insight into singular but nonetheless theoretically revealing experiences that would escape established methods of data collection. Participatory Linguistics (Li et al. 2023), for example, would typically involve structured instruments such as surveys and interviews. But are researchers themselves not also valid language users like any one of those subject to surveys and interviews? Is the private experience of the researcher less valid than that elicited by way of an apparently 'objective' survey or interview, and if yes, on what rational basis other than the putative 'subjectiveness' of the researcher's experience? After all, each and every of the respondents surveyed or interviewed comes from their own private and hence subjective experience, and so there is no reason why the researcher's experience should be stigmatized in the name of science. This is not to say that the so-called 'objective' data are any less valuable; rather, the researcher's experience can be factored into the equation in triangulation with other sources. One might then argue that researchers' anecdotes are

> on par with other 'objective' data sources derived using well-attested methods such as questionnaires, surveys, or ethnographic fieldwork. [Anecdotes] may be windows into intuitive, personal understandings of linguistic experience that may elude social scientific methods, and may indeed constitute the key to bridging a fundamental methodological difference between the humanities—where the researcher's intuitive and rhetorical interpretation is often central to the argument itself—and the social sciences (T. K. Lee 2022).

Using anecdotes as a source of data thus puts an analytical premium on moments and momentarity rather than patterns and systematicity. This is fully aligned with the temporality of the liquid modern age where the continuity of time is fragmented into episodes (Bauman 1996: 25). It also underlines the methodological aporia raised by transpositioning, where the object of study, comprising fluid moments without stable points of reference, cannot be captured through traditional methods of data collection (see Li 2022). It is with this understanding of moments and momentarity that we exemplify below the idea of transpositioning, using two episodes from the authors' personal communicative experiences as cases in point. These cases are by no means idiosyncratic. They represent moments from two individuals' lived experience that may very well resonate (even partially) with the lived experiences of others without, however, pointing to structural frequencies. With the two cases, we hope to foreground the messy and ludic dimension of social interaction as a corrective to the impulse toward systemic analysis in applied linguistics research.

4.1 Story 1: from alterity to locality and back again

Our first example is based on the lived experience of one of the authors, Tong King (TK). The story demonstrates how multilingual and transnational persons perform fluid identity positions through the strategic manipulation of semiotic resources with different indexical values, hence transpositioning between different personas in different time-spaces and beyond any fixated positioning.

TK is a Singaporean who has lived in Hong Kong for slightly more than a decade, working as an academic in a local university. He is fully bilingual in English and Mandarin, with a partial listening proficiency in Teochew and Hokkien as well as a high proficiency in Singapore colloquial English (Singlish). Cantonese, the dominant spoken language in Hong Kong, was initially absent in his repertoire. During his first couple of years in Hong Kong, TK was completely mesmerized by the vibrant city. He proactively sought opportunities to learn the local tongue through listening to and speaking it in vernacular café-restaurants, where waiters or waitresses would habitually repeat customers' orders as they scribbled them on a piece of paper. In the beginning TK invariably delivered Cantonese in barely coherent bits and pieces—and due to his eagerness to learn the language, he was not embarrassed to do so—only to be corrected by the waiters or waitresses as they confirmed his orders by echoing them in Cantonese. By attuning to the local tongue in this and other ways, TK was able to improve his enunciation through feedback loops ensuing from frequent usage and self-correction. Soon enough he found himself seeking out opportunities to use Cantonese in situations even where English was an option, such as when using banking services and communicating with administrative staff in the workplace. Hence, his repertoire continued to expand as spoken Cantonese came to be acquired with increasing facility, although he was still (happily) struggling to be eloquent (As an aside, his acquisition of Cantonese led to a concurrent attrition of his Hokkien and Teochew, which are not often used in Hong Kong and in which he was not fluent to begin with).

In the course of all this, TK consciously repressed Mandarin to some extent, especially in public spaces where Mandarin had become indexicalized in the local discursive imaginary as marking a speaker's geopolitical origin in mainland China. At the same time, the use of spoken English was restricted to communicating with expatriates or in professional situations that required a level of Cantonese beyond TK's proficiency. This flexible manipulation of speech resources points to how TK was in effect disarticulating a 'default' identity position through a trans-performance in everyday interactions: he was seeking to conceal traces of his alterity as a Singaporean Chinese vis-à-vis Hong Kong Chinese by systematically adapting his repertoire, with a view to become fully perceived as a local person.

In the context of teaching in his university, TK's predominant medium was (still is) English. And by virtue of his origin, his English accent was, at that point in time, distinctively Singaporean. Although he was conscious of his accent, he did not think it would be an issue at all. That was until a few of his students commented in an end-of-semester survey that they could not

understand some of what he said during lectures due to his 'accented' English (as if the so-called native varieties of English were not also accented). Mindful of his speech patterns now, TK began to tweak his accent, especially while teaching, to foreground a more 'neutral' accent, that is, one not identifiably Singaporean nor British (the latter being the benchmark for English in both Hong Kong and Singapore). Thanks to his academic background in language and linguistics, TK was able to consciously finetune the phonetic nuances of his speech, such as subtly shifting the place of articulation (as in 'supermarket', where the last syllable is pronounced more like 'cat' in Singapore English), accentuated emphasis on the first syllable of noun forms (as in 'supermarket', where the first and third syllables are unstressed in Singapore English), increased rhotacization (Singapore English features a de-rhotacized 'r', as in superm-ah-ket), and varying lexical as well as sentential intonation (Singapore English features relatively flat sentential intonations). Meanwhile, Singapore English as it is spoken was still a component register within his repertoire. It was activated in two situations, namely when communicating with fellow Singaporeans in Hong Kong and while TK was back in Singapore (with further stratifications depending on the formality of the setting). In all other circumstances, it was suppressed and remained a latent register.

There is, therefore, a bifurcation as to how TK used English in front of others, correlating with the identity position he wished to claim in a specific environment vis-à-vis his interlocutors. Specifically, two registers developed in his repertoire. One is what may be called a 'loose' register, comprising English as it is spoken in Singapore to which he is attuned throughout his education and socialization; the other is a 'tight' register, a more standard register of English cleansed of the idiosyncrasies of Singapore English but is not anywhere close to Received Pronunciation (or other recognized pronunciation standards) either. Between the two registers, he keeps transpositioning hither and thither having regard to all the circumstances of the interaction at hand. He was acutely aware of the various identity positions available to him—Singaporean, Hong Kong resident, university professor, colleague-at-work, close friend, acquaintance, and so on—and consciously pitched the way he spoke according to shifting time-spaces (e.g. from a lecture theatre to a coffee shop) as well as the differential relations between the participants involved.

The twist to the story: in more recent years TK's initial passion for Hong Kong as a place to work and live in had for various reasons dampened considerably, at the same time as his command of Cantonese had improved through long-term usage. His affective positionality toward Hong Kong had changed. Whereas hitherto he would accommodate the locals by using Cantonese as his preferred language as far as is practicable, the equation was now reversed. He started repressing Cantonese in daily conversations, tactically camouflaging his ability to speak the language. English was now foregrounded instead in most interactions, even where he could have used the local tongue with ease, such as in Starbucks coffee shops where baritas are trained to serve in multiple languages. The motivation for this shift was that he was consciously shaping a radically different persona for himself—that of an expatriate as opposed to a local resident. In other words, he was now performing alterity instead of locality and no longer wanted to stretch his repertoire to align with the host society. Instead of straining himself to use Cantonese, he now preferred to transfer the communicative burden to his interlocutors by having *them* (vs. the 'I') speak English (a second language for most local Hong Kong people) to accommodate him instead. This is particularly the case in professional service encounters such as insurance or banking. Only in settings where English was not an option, such as in vernacular café-restaurants or street stalls, would he switch to the Cantonese 'channel' in his repertoire for instrumental purposes such as ordering food or purchasing necessities. In most other cases, when his interlocutors started a conversation in Cantonese, he would (rather cheekily) feign ignorance of the language and request for English to be used. This was a calculated move, which TK knew would invariably trigger a humbly apologetic response from the other party for assuming he knew Cantonese— which he in fact does, of course. Over time this act of imposturing, of transiting in and out of different language personas, came to take on a game-like character for him, a game he would still play in his daily communications in Hong Kong today.

To complicate the picture, TK is researching in Kongish, a creative blend of colloquial Cantonese and English, as part of his vocation. Thus, while partially shedding his identity as a Cantonese speaker in everyday interaction, his intellectual appreciation of the dynamic character of the local parole has increased. His academic disposition and his personal affective stance toward Cantonese are now in tension. These contradictory impulses created a 'floatingness' in TK's identity positioning in respect of Cantonese, which is not subject to a defined state. Overall, TK has consciously transposed himself into an insider-outsider in Hong Kong, navigating to-and-fro between various guises by manipulating his speech resources according to the contingencies and relationalities in different time-spaces. He has become a *transitional being*, revelling in a state of transpositioning from one language or register to another and refusing to settle on any one identity.

What we are witnessing in this story is a propensity for linguistic fluidity on the part of a multilingual person. This fluidity points to an indeterminacy where an individual's persona-in-communication is not an organic structure, but rather a contingent disposition simultaneously marked by ambivalence (both/and), ambiguity (either/or), and negation (neither/nor). Prima facie, TK's communicative practice may resemble codeswitching. Yet identifying the language codes used in specific interactional settings has little purchase beyond telling us the number of named languages known to an individual. Such an approach fails to capture *motivated absence*, where a language is intentionally deactivated to dissociate oneself from a particular identity position. It also assumes that language codes are well-defined consoles complete with their stock of lexicon and grammatical rules, and therefore cannot account for what Blommaert (2010: 23) calls 'truncated multilingualism', where a language is acquired and activated in fragments (as, for instance, the broken Cantonese TK initially spoke), not as a complete and codified entity. Crucially, the idea of code suggests a potential for codification. This is contrary to our conception of multilingual practices as based on instantaneity rather than regularity, entailing on-the-spur moments rather than patterned moves (Lee and Li 2020; Li 2022; T. K. Lee 2022).

Translanguaging, with its emphasis on multi-sourced resources rather than distinct codes, is a more suitable rubric to account for the experience of transpositioning. In our example, TK's linguistic trajectory is evolving and transformative, demonstrating a high degree of liquidity in his management of communicative resources. We saw how he initially expanded his repertoire by acquiring and proactively foregrounding resources from a new language to masquerade as a local in the host society, only to strategically stifle those resources years later, with an eye to performing an expatriate identity by way of activating resources from a hegemonic language. Accents are continually adjusted along the way to fit with identity profiles desired in particular time-spaces. In performing these transpositionings, the subject creates dynamic social spaces in which his personal beliefs, subjectivities, and stances, which change at different points in his lived experience, are played out.

4.2 Story 2: navigating positionings on a digital platform

Our second example comes from WeChat exchanges between one of the authors Li Wei (LW) and two of his friends, DM and SX, all multilingual and transnational. WeChat or 微信 Wēixìn in Chinese, literally 'micro-message', is an instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. It is described as an 'app for everything' because of its wide-ranging functionalities, providing, for example, text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcast (one-to-many) messaging, video conferencing, video games, sharing of photographs and videos, location sharing, e-commerce, etc. As such, it enables people in different geographical locations to act and interact simultaneously and spontaneously. It was first released in 2011, and has since become the world's largest standalone mobile app with over one billion monthly active users across the world. In addition to exchanging messages one-to-one, one can form groups with any number of people. LW-DM-SX is such a group. Their exchanges are in both Chinese and English, and had text messages, memes, voice messages which can be converted to text, videos taken by the three interactants as well as shared from other people's postings, and forwarded messages.

The exchanges themselves are fascinating translingual and transmodal practices, worthy of detailed analyses, which are beyond the scope of the present article. And for confidentiality reasons, we are unable to show the actual screenshots of the exchanges. But it is the contents, and how modes are combined and orchestrated to convey them, that are of primary interest here, in particular, the ways whereby the three people displayed and changed their positionings.

The episodes of exchange we present here took place during the autumn of 2022. In September, DM, a Chinese Canadian who was living and working in Beijing as a businessman, got locked down in Shanghai unexpectedly during a business trip there, because the apartment block he was staying in had people who tested positive for Covid-19. All those who were in the building had to stay indoors for 10 days. After protesting, DM was told that as a foreign passport holder he could leave China but could not go to another city in China—he wanted to return to Beijing. But because there was no flight from Shanghai to Canada at the time, DM bought himself a one-way ticket to Paris, intending to go on to Toronto from there. LW did not think it was a good idea and was concerned that DM might find it difficult to get back to China. SX, a Chinese Australian, on the other hand, was critical of China's public policies generally. In particular, he thought China's zero-case policy was stupid. So he was supportive of DM's plan of getting out of China. He reposted several videos and images of people complaining about the shortage of food supply and the poor quality of the food parcels sent by the local authorities. The tone of his messages though was sarcastic. For instance, Shanghai people are well-known for wanting more vegetables than meat for their cuisine and many were complaining about the difficulty of getting fresh vegetables during lockdown. When SX reposted videos of Shanghai people frantically ordering vegetables online, he added his own comment to DM: 让他们抢吧。帝都人有肉包子吃就行, 不需*vegetables*. (Let them [Shanghai people] fight. Meat buns are sufficient for people from the Imperial City [Beijing], no need for vegetables.) So despite the fact that he was anti-China's Covid policies broadly, he was concerned for the wellbeing of ordinary people and his comments were not the same as those by Western politicians and commentators who aimed their criticism directly at the Chinese government.

After staying in Paris with his relatives for a few weeks, DM got to Toronto in mid-October. He sent a number of messages expressing his surprise at how few people wore face masks in Paris and Toronto. His changing locations made him notice the differences between China and western countries. LW and SX confirmed that in both London and Sydney hardly anyone was wearing face mask. And they also shared an observation that the few people who did wear face masks in public seemed to be East Asians. Whilst they took different positions on lockdown policies, they all shared the same view that face mask was a useful and necessary protection. In his WeChat messages, DM shared his hope that the zero-case policy and the quarantine requirements for visitors to China would be lifted after the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2022. Rumours were rife at the time that this might happen, but SX was very sceptical; in fact he was quite adamant that it would not happen. SX was proven right: there was no policy change immediately after the party congress. This was a huge disappointment especially to LW because his family suffered a bereavement during the summer of 2022. But they could not return to Beijing at the time, as the compulsory quarantine period was 3 weeks plus another week of self-isolation. The three exchanged a number of messages and memes expressing despair.

However, by the end of November, the quarantine requirement for visitors from outside China was reduced to 5 + 3, that is five days in a quarantine centre and three days of self-isolation at one's private address. Daily testing was still mandatory. Government spokespersons still insisted on zero-case policy in their public announcements. DM decided that it was now time to return to Beijing so that he could spend Christmas and New Year with his elderly parents there. Before he did, he got a Pfizer booster in Toronto. SX praised DM's decision, as he had said repeatedly that he did not believe the Chinese vaccines were effective or reliable. Both LW and DM thought SX was overly negative towards the Chinese vaccines; yet, SX provided various reports that showed Chinese vaccines were not effective. On this issue, SX was imposing his strong views on LW and

DM, who took SX's impositioning in good faith but also resisted it. LW, echoing SX's sarcastic tone, posted the image in Figure 1:

The text in Figure 1 reads 'Practice is the sole criterion for testing Truth', a Chinese Communist Party's mantra in the post-Mao era, and the image is China's paramount leader of the 1980s Deng Xiaoping's handwriting. LW chose this image and the mantra both as a subtle reminder to SX that he should be more patient to see the evidence, but also to show his shared unease over the government policies around the management of Covid-19 in China.

DM returned to Beijing during the first week of December and spent five days in a quarantine hotel as required. He was then allowed to go back to his own home in Beijing but was expected to self-isolate for another three days. On the day he left the quarantine hotel, he was sending text and voice messages, plus pictures and video clips to LW and SX, telling them what happened: the neighbourhood committee of the compound where he lived had to officially approve his return and they sent a car to pick him up from the quarantine hotel. But the driver would not help with DM's luggage, claiming that the policy was not to touch overseas visitors' belongings in fear of infection. LW and SX thought it was ridiculous, felt sorry for DM, but made light of it. DM did not mind either. The day after he returned home, however, all quarantine and self-isolation requirements were lifted suddenly. DM sent messages and images of neighbourhood test units being dismantled and 大白 ('big-white') or the white personal protection coveralls that Chinese Covid workers typically wore burned.

Both DM and LW were in a celebratory mood. But SX took a different position: while the videos and pictures he reposted also show street barriers and testing booths being removed or trashed, he commented on people's anger towards the Covid control policies. In his typical sarcastic tone, he made the following remarks: 百万大白军的饭碗没了, 失业人口翻倍。(The rice bowls of the army of millions of Big White [those wearing the white PPEs] are now lost. Unemployment rate will double.) And he predicted, 'Infection rate will go through the roof', because 国产疫苗靠不住! (China-made vaccines are not reliable!). He was proven correct once again. The number of people who tested positive did go through the roof in mid-December 2022 in China. All of DM's closest relatives tested positive except him. This led to some very interesting exchanges between the three (Figure 2).

This triggered a rant from SX over the way the restrictions were lifted, critiquing the Chinese authorities of being irresponsible for the lives of ordinary citizens. DM and LW tried to argue that the restrictions have to be lifted and China must learn to live with Covid, though they did agree with SX that the sudden lifting, without any preparation, caused serious problems.

The shared experience of being transnationals of Chinese heritage amongst the three participants in this exchange offers an important affordance for different positionings and transpositioning. On the surface though, SX does not seem to have changed his position much; he remains very negative towards the Chinese government's policies. But there are important differences in his positionings underneath the surface: he started off arguing for lifting up the restrictions because he thought the zero-case policy was draconian, impractical, and unrealistic. But when the restrictions were lifted suddenly and completely in early December 2022, SX changed his
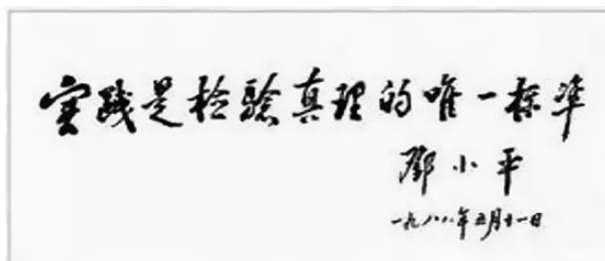

Figure 1: 'Practice is the sole criterion for testing Truth'.

Figure 2: A multimodal conversation on WeChat.

tack and focussed on the unreliability of the China-made vaccines and the loss of employment of the Covid testers. Strategically, he used impositioning to conceal his change of positionings by providing 'evidence' from other media postings to try and convince the others of his arguments.

Transpositioning is the performing of multiplex roles simultaneously and spontaneously. In the first example, we see that TK strategically selects resources from his expanded repertoire as he transpositions between multiple personas. But broadly speaking, the language

component in the more conventional sense is still there; it is a more classic example of translanguaging. The second example, while involving the use of different named languages, is more about transmodalities. One could imagine that without the WeChat platform, the whole interaction would be very different, and the stances of the individuals may change and change at different points: imagine, for instance, if the same topic were discussed by the same individuals through email exchanges or phone calls instead. It is the affordance of instant, real-time to-and-fro messaging between the participants that facilitate their transpositioning. This suggests that in liquid modernity, we do not simply have different language resources in our repertoire but also *medial resources*. A switch in media may cause or be caused by transpositioning. Work email and personal email are different; email and instant messaging are different; instant messaging and social media posting are different; scribbling something on paper to a colleague and sending a formal email are different. And we all have to use multiple media simultaneously in our everyday lives, which means we are constantly shifting our positions vis-a-vis different people. We take on different roles through different media, and the different media in turn shape our roles and how we transposition.

5. Conclusion

Liquid modernity, marked by perpetual contingencies and deterritorialized identities, has led to a fundamental transformation in our understanding of language as the privileged medium of writing. This is more pronounced in digital environments, where the ineluctable trend is for discursive communication to become increasingly transmodal. As highlighted in the concepts of translanguaging and transmodalities, no single named language or modality is able to meet the demands of liquid modernity. The hyper-mediatized and heterotopic semiotic landscape of contemporary societies is but characterized by one attribute: change. It also embodies the commodification of signs, which are virtual currencies circulating globally among prosumers (one who both produces and consumes content) and fluctuating in use-value over time. Such an economy of signs gives rise to what we might call a *semiotic of transience*, where communicative resources come into popular usage and fall into expiration within short and ever-shortening intervals of time.

The semiotic of transience produces a very different ontology of the self, which needs to be differentiated from the psychoanalytic Self with a capitalized 'S'. The modern self is continually inflected by multiple shifting vectors; it is not a discrete, bounded entity, but rather a temporary postulate or critical project (Bauman 1996: 19) the stability of which lies precisely in its instability. This is an always-transitory self subject to transpositionings, resulting in a position that is not *a* position at all but one that transcends all specific positions. This entails a critical avoidance of fixation and commitment (Bauman 1996: 24–25). Like translanguaging, transpositioning denotes a processual condition and resists nominalization; as a corollary, the form 'transposition' as it is used in our sense is always a verb, not a noun. To transposition is therefore to play out a strategic ambiguity in respect of one's stance or identity, and in this connection, we must recall Bauman's pertinent remark that identity, 'though ostensibly a noun, behaves like a verb' (1996: 19). Identity is accordingly an 'invention' of modernity—not modernity in the classical sense, of course, but in the liquid sense; it arises and evolves 'whenever one is not sure of where one belongs, one is not sure where to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that *both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence*' (1996: 19; added emphasis). The last phrase here suggests that identities unravel and morph in subtle ways through text-and-talk, as demonstrated in our second story.

As a processual act of navigation among participants in communication, transpositioning is often mediated by border-challenging practices such as translanguaging and transmodalities. It is through these practices that transpositioning diffuses any singular stances and disperses fossilized identities, thus impelling a new mode of approaching people, events, and circumstances.

This gains a new valency given the rise of borders, specifically 'the return of borders in a post-protectionist world' (Graziano 2018[2017]: 67). Borders, according to Graziano,

> are just one of many political objects: they are multidimensional and multifunctional in nature, and their political, legal, social, moral, and even psychological footprint changes in time and in space. Like other political objects, they are a tool for social interaction and the exercise of power, but in comparison to other political objects, they are intrinsically and ontologically ambivalent. They at once separate and bring individuals together; they divide territories where different legal, political, ideological, religious, sartorial, and dietary norms apply; and they are also the place where these various norms intersect and combine. They are, in short, zones in which conflict and contact alternate perpetually and, much more frequently, overlap (Graziano 2018[2017]: 6–7).

Precisely because borders constitute the interface between different practices, norms, and ideologies, they are also potential zones of division incubating what Feffer (2019) calls 'the psychology of the wall' (n.p.) or what Wapner (2020) calls 'wall disease'. Walls embody the ideologies of isolationism and protectionism the consequences of which can be immense. As Graziano warns us, in a post-protectionist world that is simultaneously connected within the global capitalist market, 'protectionism and the closing of borders are the inescapable prelude to a generalized war' (2018[2017]: 78).

Transpositioning serves as a corrective to this psychology (or disease) of the wall, including metaphorical walls on interpersonal rather than geopolitical fronts. By refusing to settle on any single stance, transpositioning affords language users a high degree of flexibility within the social space in which communication unfolds, enabling them to creatively and critically engage with multiple perspectives. In so doing, conventional identity categories constructed around such parameters as native language, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, educational level, and social class are transgressed. In this regard, transpositioning aligns with what global social theorists call Border Thinking, a term that describes 'the epistemology of the exteriority; that is, of the outside created from the inside' (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006: 206), notably by tapping into alternative traditions of language, culture, and knowledge. Border thinking reminds us of the ease with which we may fall prey to essentialism, which locks us into conditioned frames of mind, thus unavailing us of a range of vantage points each of which underpins a particular window on reality. In an age where walls are constantly erected in the service of populist agents thriving on essentialist identities and invented monolingualism, border thinking and transpositioning are more imperative than ever.

Translanguaging facilitates transpositioning. The juxtaposition of the two terms underscores the simultaneous activation of multiple identities by way of mobilizing resources across the boundaries of named languages, new media, and entrenched ideologies. In this process, borders are renegotiated, circumvented, even outright rejected. What ensues are emergent and evolving semiotic spaces in which play—in the sense of a certain lightness of being, marked by a creative and critical ludicity—is a method of social engagement. One might thus say that communication in the liquid modern age comprises a non-committal play of identities where language users, in the manner of free-and-easy tourists creating itineraries on the whim, spontaneously (re)invent themselves by orchestrating all available and accessible resources in their semiotic repertoire in response to communicative stimuli from others. This will to translanguaging and transpositioning stands in higher relief in the present GenAI (Generative Artificial Intelligence) era, where the spectrum of affordances available for uptake to effect spontaneous communication is expanding exponentially. The powerful translingual and multimodal potentialities of AI may push liquid modernity to its limit, which would in turn fuel further impulse toward transpositioning. The added complication is an acceleration toward posthumanist communication: human agents are transpositioning not only vis-à-vis other human agents, but also in relation to algorithmic AI programs figuring as a central nonhuman actant in the virtual communication network (Lee 2023). The upshot of this is an increased provisionalization of social relations and selfhood, cultivating in contemporary persons an ethic of ludicity and an ethos of the trans-.

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